

THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY
ROUTES



Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

5



The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a winter scene. In the foreground, a young girl with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes is looking towards the viewer. She is wearing a dark blue dress with a white fur collar and cuffs, and a white headband with a red ribbon. Her hair is blowing in the wind. Behind her, a young man with long black hair is looking off to the side. He is wearing a dark blue coat. The background shows a snowy landscape with a castle in the distance and a large, ornate building with columns in the foreground. The sky is a mix of purple and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. There are small white snowflakes falling throughout the scene.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Leonhart von Orsein

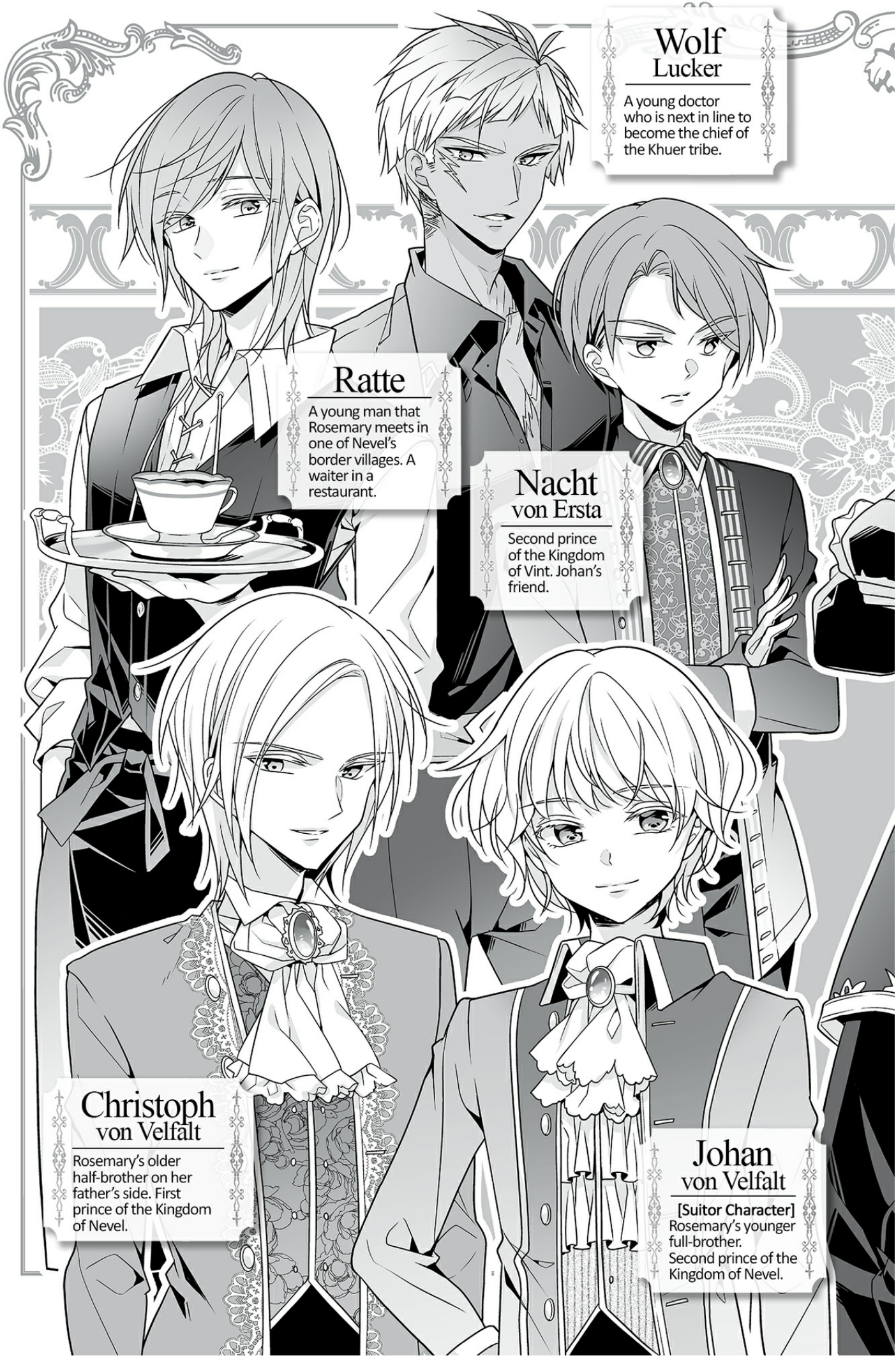
The knight captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard. The number one swordsman in the country. Rosemary's love interest.

Ernst von Lieber

Captain of Nevel's border defense force and an old friend of Leonhart's.

Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who was reincarnated into the world of an otome game and retained the memories of her past life. First princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. Resolves to rectify the suitor characters' personality faults in order to achieve a peaceful future.



Wolf Lucker

A young doctor who is next in line to become the chief of the Khuer tribe.

Ratte

A young man that Rosemary meets in one of Nevel's border villages. A waiter in a restaurant.

Nacht von Ersta

Second prince of the Kingdom of Vint. Johan's friend.

Christoph von Velfalt

Rosemary's older half-brother on her father's side. First prince of the Kingdom of Nevel.

Johan von Velfalt

[Suitor Character]
Rosemary's younger full-brother.
Second prince of the Kingdom of Nevel.

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Prologue

Long ago, every person in our world could use magic.

Some people could command water and summon rain for crops. Some had power over earth and the ability to hasten the growth of plants. Others could stir up breezes to dry their washed clothes, and still others could light fires to warm their homes. Everyone helped each other and spent their days in happiness.

However, conflict began to brew between people. Soon they began to fight one another for possession of land and harm each other with magic.

One day, a strange creature appeared. When It lit fires, It scorched the land to ash. When It summoned rain, floods swept everything away. Breezes gave way to storms, and the very earth opened up and swallowed people.

Countless people lost their lives because of It. The people wailed and asked why It was doing this. But It wasn't a person, so human languages had no chance of reaching It. People tried desperately to fight back against It, but to no avail. It couldn't be destroyed... Not with water, not with earth, not with the wind, and not with fire.

And after a time, humanity had to face more enemies than just It—monsters appeared, ones that people had never before seen, and they started to gather in defense of It. The monsters had shells that were too thick for swords to pierce and teeth sharp enough to rip shields into pieces. No human could fight back, and the number of dead grew without bound.

Fearing that this was the end of the world, the panicked kings of every nation convened. And so, the rulers decided that the finest heroes from every corner of the world would be summoned.

The largest country on the continent sent a knight, their finest swordsman.

The continent's northernmost country sent a prodigious young sorcerer, the most powerful in a longstanding dynasty of magic users.

The southernmost country sent a priest with healing powers.

The island country to the continent's east sent an expert archer.

Finally, from the nation in the very center of the continent, the king himself joined the fray.

This group departed on a mission to slay It. Their journey was fraught with hardship, and one by one, the party members fell, until only the king and the sorcerer remained. With his dying breath, the sorcerer defeated It.

The last remaining warrior, the king, gave his slain companions proper burials and then returned to his kingdom. He announced to his people that It would harm them no more, and the news was met with celebration and revelry.

However, their happiness was short-lived.

Possessing the corpse of the sorcerer, It returned to this world.

People have fought against It many times, but It always comes back. That is why we, the people of this world, must live in harmony with one another...so that when It next returns, all of humanity can work hand in hand once more.

—Excerpt from Volume I of *Nevelian Folklore*

The Reincarnated Princess Nurses

After some time, Johan's sobs subsided, and his breathing returned to the gentle rhythm of sleep. I tenderly removed my hand from above his eyes. They seemed slightly puffy, and I could see the trails left by tears on his face. Even so, he looked peaceful.

I gently brushed away a teardrop that hadn't quite dripped from his eye and then let out a sigh of relief. "Get a little more rest..." I whispered while stroking his hair.

His blond hair was unkempt; sweat and dirt had taken its luster away. His face was as pretty as I remembered, but there were dark clouds beneath his eyes. I noticed that his skin was sunburned and covered in scrapes, and on top of that, his forehead had been dressed with a white bandage.

When cleaned up, he'd look like the perfect prince on par with my older brother Chris... But right now, he was scruffy. Regardless, my little brother's scruffiness looked unbelievably handsome to me.

"You've gone and grown so dashing in the short time we've been apart..."

I laid my hand down on his sunken cheek. He looked different from the boy I remembered: his lips were less plump, his nose was high-bridged, and his jaw was more prominent. It was also the first time I could recall seeing the muscular shape of his hands and shoulders, along with his Adam's apple. And, I'd been surprised to hear his voice—the few words I'd heard him utter a few minutes ago had come out in such a low tone.

However, his body wasn't the only thing to have undergone surprising changes. The knights from the Kingdom of Vint and the residents of the village had told me about Johan's actions, about all the aid he had offered. He sounded like a hero...so much so, that I couldn't quite reconcile their accounts of him with the little boy who'd bobbed around after me like a baby chick. But, seeing his disheveled appearance, I knew that their reports were fact, true and unexaggerated.

Oh, you've worked so hard. The realization slowly permeated through my mind like water through fabric, and my heart swelled with love and pride. *You're my spoiled, selfish, crybaby little brother no more,* I thought. *The tiny boy who said I'm the only one he needs...is gone.*

That realization made me feel ever so slightly lonely, but much more than that, I was glad. I wanted to run around singing his praises to everyone. *Did you see how amazing my little brother is? How cool is that?!*

"I'll do my best too..."

Though I didn't want to leave his side, I had plenty of things to do. Right now, the Khuer were probably still running to and fro treating the sick. Prince Nacht had returned to Vint's capital to acquire food and relief supplies, and Sir Leonhart had accompanied him as a guard. It wouldn't be right for me to take it easy while everyone else was working nonstop.

I patted Johan's head one last time before getting to my feet, quietly, so as not to wake him. Lightly, I pushed the door open...and found a child outside peering back at me. A group of people was waiting outside the house. Upon seeing me, they opened their mouths to speak, so I quickly raised a finger to my lips since I didn't want them to wake Johan. My intentions must've been apparent because they all covered their mouths with their hands. The child used both hands, and the sight was so adorable that I couldn't help but smile.

I quietly shut the door, crouched down, made eye contact with the child, and gestured that it was all right for him to speak now.

He removed his hands from his mouth and averted his eyes from me. His tightly clenched fists and pursed lips made it clear that he was reluctant to put something into words. But then he raised his head like he'd finally worked up the nerve to speak. "The boy in there... You're his sister, right?"

"Yep. The boy sleeping in there is my little brother."

The boy's lip quivered like he was about to cry when he heard my confirmation. My eyes shot wide open, and I would've reached out to hold him, but before I could, the boy flung his head down.

"I'm sorry!"

“Huh?!”

The boy fought to speak without crying. “It’s... It’s my fault. He got hurt because I asked him to help...”

“No, I’m to blame!” exclaimed one member of the crowd. “I started a fight with this kid’s dad... That’s why!”

“No, *I’m* to blame!” shouted another. “I shouldn’t have thrown that stone.”

“No, it’s me!” said a third.

“It’s me.”

“It’s my fault.”

“No, blame me.”

Each confession of fault from the crowd was contested by another.

Feeling overwhelmed, I wiped the child’s tears away.

I was no stranger to the maneuvers people used to dodge blame, but this was the first time I’d seen people clamoring to claim fault all for themselves. Given the severity of the situation, it would have been reasonable if they’d tried to excuse their actions; after all, they’d been trapped in a disease-ridden village with almost no food or medicine. But despite that, all of them were taking responsibility for their mistakes.

This was what Johan had protected. I felt even more amazed by him than I had before. He’d protected not just their bodies but their hearts as well.

A ticklish sense of happiness scratched at my heart, and I could barely resist the urge to brag about my little brother. “*He’s just the best, isn’t he?*” I fancied saying. “*What else would you expect from my little brother?*” But...perhaps that would’ve been a bit shameless.

I haven’t quite reached the point where I’ll stoop to take credit for my little brother’s accomplishments.

“I’m so sorry, so sorry for hurting your broth—*mmmph.*”

I pressed my finger against the child’s lips, forcing him to stop speaking.

His round, tear-filled eyes widened a little and then even more when I smiled

at him.

“My little brother tripped on a tree root,” I stated. “That’s what *actually* happened.”

Everyone around the child gasped.

“So,” I continued, “it’s nobody’s fault that he hurt himself.”

Hearing their gasps, I figured that they had understood what I was hinting at. The knights had told me that Johan’s identity as a prince of Nevel was already known to the villagers, so I had to nip this problem in the bud now. Otherwise, Johan would have concocted the tripping story in vain.

But the child didn’t fall in line like the adults. He stared right at me, and I could see in his eyes that he refused to accept that story. His purity of mind seemed so noble to me.

“But... Supposing that he did get hurt trying to protect someone...” I took hold of both of the child’s hands. “Then don’t say ‘sorry.’ Say ‘thank you.’”

He blinked his large eyes.

“He’d be happier to hear that. Don’t you think so?” I smiled, and the child’s head bobbed up and down in a big nod. “Good boy,” I said, patting his head, and then I stood back up. “Thank you all for coming here out of concern for my brother. He’ll be fine after some rest, so please go and be with your families.” I ran my gaze across the people in the crowd.

For some reason, they seemed dumbfounded. After a few seconds, they snapped out of their dazed stupor and peered at me strangely, as though observing some new, unknown life-form.

To be honest, being looked at like that...made me feel like squirming.

“Are you...?” a young man began to ask.

“Sorry?” I said.

“Are you really a prin—” The young man stopped himself from finishing that question. After shaking his head, he narrowed his eyes and smiled brightly.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

I was about to ask him what he'd been about to say, but a fraction of a second before I could, I heard someone calling my name from far away. When I turned around, I saw Lily waving her arm above her head. "Lady Mary, would you mind giving me a hand over here?"

"Okaaaay!" I shouted back.

I waved goodbye to the people in front of me and ran over to Lily.

The Future Chief's Whisper

"I'll leave the extra medicine here, Wolf."

"Thanks." I expressed my gratitude without lifting my gaze from what I was doing with my hands.

Lily practically tripped over herself in a rush to leave; I heard the sound of the door closing after the noise of her receding footsteps had already vanished.

I put my arm around the boy I was treating, helped him sit up, and brought a bowl toward him. Slowly, I poured the contents of the bowl—ground medicine dissolved in lukewarm water—into his open mouth.

The boy furrowed his brows as he gulped the mixture down. "Yuck..." He pulled a face like he didn't want to drink any more.

"Good to know your taste buds still work," I joked, softly shaking my head to answer his silent plea, and then I tilted the bowl once more.

Although he did grimace, in the end, he opened his mouth.

This medicine was particularly bitter. It was nasty enough to ingest in pill form, but the taste was even worse when it was mixed in water. Yet, despite his young age, he knew that he had to drink this in order to recover.

And so, he begrudgingly drank the mixture.

"Bleeeh..."

Once he'd finished the bowl, including the clumps of powder that had settled on the bottom of the vessel, I declared, "All done."

The boy stuck out his tongue and groaned, probably suffering the bitter aftertaste. I offered him a fresh drink of pure water to clear the flavor from his palate, and he gulped this one down without a fight. When he'd finished the drink and had gotten a second to catch his breath, I laid him back down and stroked his hair.

"Now what you have to do is rest."

“Kay...” he murmured compliantly, beginning to drift off. “Mister?”

“Yeah?”

“Am I gonna get better?”

My hand, which had been stroking his hair, suddenly stopped. He was staring at me pleadingly with his pure, honest eyes.

I couldn't begin to imagine how hard and how scary being in this village must've been for a child so young. He'd gotten sick and lost his mobility. He'd seen the despairing looks on his parents' faces. He'd had to listen to the tortured, resentful arguments that had sprouted up here and there among the villagers.

I could feel my face about to scrunch up, but I squeezed my hands into fists and forced myself to smile.

“You betcha. Don't think that you're going to get to lie around in bed forever. You're a kid, so you need to hurry up and get back on your feet. After all, you have lots of running around outside to do.”

“I will?” the boy whispered, and a relaxed smile appeared on his lips. Now, probably because he was more at ease, he shut his eyes.

I patted him on the head, and after a while, I could hear from the healthy sound of his breathing that he'd fallen asleep.

“Who *are* you people?” someone asked. I turned to see a man in early old age. He was lying down in the bed next to the boy's and had clearly been waiting for the child to drift off. The old man lifted the damp cloth from his forehead and looked at me.

“Just doctors.”

“The doctors that serve the local lord gave up on us, said there was nothing they could do. No ordinary doctor could possibly help us get better.”

“You *will* get better. No, we'll *make* you better,” I promised.

The man's eyes widened slightly, and a faint smile tugged at his mouth. “Don't get me wrong, I believe you... But that's what's strange. Just who *are* you people? Where did you come from?”

“We’re just doctors, like I said. Now, stop chatting or you’ll bring your fever back. You just stay in that bed, okay?”

I took the cloth from his forehead, soaked it in water, wrung it out a little, and replaced it. I then picked up a nearby fan and waved it at the man, who narrowed his eyes with pleasure.

“Something smells nice,” he said.

A citrusy aroma wafted throughout the room, accompanied by strands of white smoke. “That’ll be the incense I’m burning,” I said. “It’s for repelling bugs, but it’s good to hear you like the smell.”

Although I had measured out the incense so as not to burn too much, I’d anticipated that I might have to extinguish it for a while if the room became too smoky. But it looked like that wouldn’t be a problem after all.

“I have heard about this one miraculous tribe...” murmured the old man. “They live deep in the mountains, have unparalleled expertise with medicine, and can bring the sick back from the brink of death... I always thought that was just a fairy tale.”

“It *is* a fairy tale.” I stopped fanning the man and smiled bitterly. “We can’t perform miracles.”

I’d watched so many people lose their lives before my very eyes. Each time, I’d hated myself for being so powerless, and I’d even started to doubt the meaning of my own life. After all, what was the point in trying when I couldn’t actually help?

But...

“All we have is the knowledge and techniques handed down to us by our ancestors. Other than that, we’re more or less just an unremarkable collection of stubborn people. But there’s a kid who bowed to us, who said we were needed, and that’s why we’re here. That’s all there is to it.”

“Do you mean Nacht?”

“Uhhh, no,” I scoffed and furrowed my brows at the sudden mention of this unfamiliar name. “Never heard of him.”

Who's this Nacht? Actually... Maybe I have heard the name before, somewhere.

When I stated that I didn't know him, the man grew cranky. "How can you say that you've never heard of someone who's as amazing as the grouchy prince?"

The word "prince" jogged my memories. *Oh, it's that short kid we saw right before we entered the forest. I think he's the second prince of this kingdom.* He hadn't interested me, so I hadn't bothered to remember his name. The man had called him "amazing," so he did seem to be held in high regard... But the prince's nickname seemed to call that regard into question.

"Not a very flattering nickname," I remarked.

"It's the truth—he really *is* grouchy. But he's kind too," the man said, bashfully turning his face away. "He's our pride and joy."

His fever probably wasn't the only cause of his red cheeks.

"What a coincidence," I said while replacing the cloth that had slipped from the man's forehead. "See, Mary's *our* pride and joy."

The man looked at me like he had no idea who I was talking about.

"Her Highness Rosemary von Velfalt." Saying her name warmed my heart. The pleasant warmth slowly seeped throughout my body like a candle had been lit. I felt kind of embarrassed and happy at the same time, and I let my feelings show in my smile before I continued. "She's the first princess of the Kingdom of Nevel who raced here to save you all. And she's our one and only master."

The man's jaw dropped.

"It doesn't matter how amazing your prince is," I continued. "Only *she* gets to give us orders. Only Mary."

I had to admit that the boy prince must've been a remarkable character; very few royals would go to such lengths to save their country's people. But fewer still could risk their lives for *another country's* citizens.

"Why would a foreign princess do this for us...?" the man asked, stunned.

I put on a wry smile. "Beats me. I don't know her well enough to understand how her mind works." After all, we hadn't known each other for very long.

Mary... When it came to her, there were more mysteries left to untangle than riddles solved. This had been made even more clear to me after I arrived in Vint. For example, I hadn't known just how well she got along with her brother, and also...

I remembered Mary's bashfully blushing cheeks, and...him. The tall, muscular man. He'd been quite the looker.

"And I never knew she was in love..." I whispered almost imperceptibly. My quiet utterance disappeared into nothingness along with the incense smoke, heard by nobody.

The Reincarnated Princess's Meetup

"So hot..."

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. The tree coverage offered some protection from the sun, but the humidity in this forest was unbearable. It felt like I was walking through water, and it sapped my stamina. The air that I sucked in through my lips was heavy, and I found it a little hard to breathe.

"Lady Mary," Lily called out.

I turned to face her as she ran over to me.

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard," she said. "Why don't you take a break?"

"Thanks. I'm almost done handing these out, and I'll take a short break when I'm finished."

Lily frowned. The changes in her expression were usually barely discernible, but I was beginning to get the hang of spotting them. For reference, this particular expression was most likely the one she made when she was frustrated with me, and the accompanying sentiment was probably "*When will she learn?*"

I smiled awkwardly.

"Please make absolutely certain that you do take a break," she insisted. "Promise me. I'm sure you've worked up a sweat, so I'll reapply the ointment." She instructed me like I was an unruly kid, and it was times like these that I could tell Lily really was older than me, despite her childish appearance.

"Okay," I replied obediently.

The purpose of the ointment she'd mentioned was to repel bugs, and it felt refreshingly cool when rubbed on my skin. Mint had probably been mixed into it. Plus, the smell was great, which was an additional lifesaver now that I'd

worked up a sweat. Girls my age can't help but worry about how they smell...

After Lily had gone, I hurried back to work. I arrived at a house, announced my presence, and then opened the door. "Pardon me!"

The first thing I saw upon entering the room was Rolf staring, entranced, at something out of my view. He was holding a pestle in his right hand and a mortar in his left, but he wasn't moving either of them. It seemed that he'd been in the middle of grinding medicine. Rolf was a brat, but he did take his work seriously—he wouldn't stop unless something remarkable had happened.

I followed his gaze to see the remarkable for myself, and what I saw took *my* words away as well.

Michael was sitting with his legs crossed and his back against the wall. His eyes were closed like he was meditating. On his lap was a child, hanging onto Michael wearily, his breathing raspy. The child's face was distorted with pain and red as ripe fruit. A faint glow surrounded Michael's hand, which was placed on the child's chest. The dim light illuminated Michael's face, revealing deep creases and beads of sweat on his forehead.

This was the second time I'd witnessed Michael using his powers, but I'd been too preoccupied with Klaus to remember much about the first time. It truly was a mystifying thing to see up close like this, and it was a strange feeling. Frankly, I couldn't blame Rolf for being unable to peel his eyes away. This might not be the best way to describe the scene, but it looked as solemnly beautiful as religious art.

I wasn't sure how long Rolf and I spent staring at him, but eventually, Michael's eyelids crept open. His eyes appeared to be a turquoise color like the hue of a deep lake, but they quickly darkened to his usual black. A sigh escaped through his tightly pursed, thin lips. "I'm worn out..." he mumbled. His shoulders drooped like he'd run out of energy.

The child he was holding was still fast asleep, propped against Michael's body. Though the boy still looked flushed, his complexion seemed to have improved slightly. His breathing and the expression on his face both seemed peaceful.

"You've earned a break," I said, crouching down in front of Michael and offering him a towel.

Michael's unfocused eyes looked first at the towel and then at me, and then they shot wide open. "Pr-Pr-Pr-Princess?!" he blurted, jumping.

I looked at him, placed a finger to my lips, and accompanied the gesture with a whispered "Shh."

At once, Michael covered his mouth with a hand. The child on his lap was still snoozing peacefully.

"Sorry for startling you," I apologized while reaching out and pressing the towel against his forehead.

When I began to wipe his sweat away, Michael blushed. He was far more adorable than me when he was embarrassed. As always, he seemed like he wasn't used to interacting with people...or maybe just girls. Even though he was older than me, it felt like I was looking after a little brother. Appearance-wise, he'd turned into the gorgeous young man that was a suitor character in *Hidden World*, but I still saw him as the cute and predictable person we'd first met.

"Were you healing this child?" I asked, pointing my eyes at the kid on his lap.

Michael shook his head. "I can't heal diseases. The best I can do is help the medicine work a little better." As he spoke, he softly rested his hand on the child's head. Both the look he showed the child and the way he stroked the boy's hair were gentle and careful.

Rolf suddenly jumped out from behind me and broke his silence. "I wanna know," he started brusquely before correcting himself. "I mean, could you please tell me—what is that power you're using?"

"Ummm..." Michael's eyes grew wide, and after looking back and forth between Rolf and me, he put on a nervous smile and scratched his cheek. "I promise it's nothing dark or dangerous... But it's...disturbing, isn't it?"

Rolf immediately disputed that. "Huh? What are you talking about? How could it possibly be disturbing?" Rolf was wearing an expression of utter incomprehension as if Michael had spouted pure nonsense.

Michael seemed stunned.

Rolf released a flurry of excited praise. "You steadied his breathing and

lowered his fever. You've shortened the wait for the medicine to work... And not just that, you've made it work *better*. What an amazing power! I wish I had it. To be honest, I'm so jealous."

I'd imagined that Rolf would be more interested in the fact that Michael had the same powers as the goddess his tribe worshiped, but no. *He wants it for himself. I can really tell he's growing up to be a doctor.*

"You're not afraid...?" asked Michael, seeming surprised.

"In spite of how he acts, Rolf is going to be a great doctor one day."

"What do *you* know about how I act, ugly?" Rolf countered.

"I know you say things like that, you little shit," I wanted to shoot back, but I held it in. *Princesses shouldn't speak like that. I've been slipping up in my good girl princess act more often lately, so I need to be careful.* "The Khuer have an insatiable appetite for medical techniques and information. They'll probably swarm you when this is all over. Get ready for a barrage of questions."

"That sounds a little scary... But I'm glad, I think," Michael whispered with a bashful smile.

Oh my god, so cute! Lemme touse your hair!

While I was watching Michael with a huge smile on my face, Rolf said to me, "You're looking creepy."

As uncute as ever, I thought. "Quiet now, Rolf." *Although he does have a point... Princesses shouldn't smirk quite like that.*

After clearing my throat to distract from the look I'd been wearing, I handed Rolf the food, clean sheets, and other supplies, then exited the house. I turned around just once and saw Rolf excitedly babbling to Michael.

It's wonderful that they're getting along, I thought as I closed the door. *It's like they're classmates... How lovely.*

Actually... A school for medicine doesn't sound like a bad idea. I know that we need hospitals, but that won't be enough—we won't have much luck making new developments unless we have facilities to nurture the next generation of doctors. What do I have to do? I need to ensure that there are facilities built for

researching new medicines and providing hands-on training for medical procedures...

I'll flesh out the plan when I'm back in Nevel.

Okay then. I feel like I could keep going all day, but I'd better squeeze in a quick break if I want to stay in Lily's good graces... Plus, if I collapse because I've overestimated how much energy I have left, I'll be giving everyone else more work to do. Lily should still be sorting through the medicines and supplies, so I think I'll go back to her.

Once I'd decided where to go, I started to walk, but my feet came to a stop in front of a particular house... The one where my brother, Johan, was sleeping.

Maybe I'll go and check in on him... But it would be a shame to wake him up. I wanted to know how he was, but I wasn't eager to disturb his sleep. While I was still making my mind up, the door flew open.

I instinctively glanced over, and I saw Johan standing there, frozen, his hand still clutching the doorknob. His hair was untidy and sticking up in places, so he must've only just woken up, and beneath his golden bangs, his deep blue eyes were opened as wide as saucers. His lips were slightly parted. He was entirely motionless, as though time were standing still.

Nervously, I called his name. "Johan...?"

His shoulders flinched.

He's acting a bit odd. Maybe he's still half-asleep? I thought, observing him. But then, out of nowhere, he slapped his own cheeks. I listened to the satisfying smack, feeling stunned.

Whoa, whoa, whoa?! What the hell's wrong with my brother?! Johan's sudden and bizarre behavior perplexed me. What's going on? Maybe this is the first sign that he's caught the disease...? No, don't be silly.

Blissfully ignorant of the mental turmoil I was going through, Johan rubbed his reddened cheeks and, with a look of disbelief, said, "Ow."

What did you expect?! Oh no, he really has lost it. Should I call Wolf? But it's not like he's...physically unwell.

But my brother's bizarre behavior didn't stop there.

Johan dropped his hands away from his cheeks and looked straight at me. I let out a nervous chuckle, feeling uncomfortable under his long stare. Then, he charged toward me with all the bestial energy of a wild boar.



I just stood there, wide-eyed and frozen in place. Within a fraction of a second, he was right in front of me. He pinched both of my cheeks, fixed my head in position so I was looking up at him, and stared into my eyes. It didn't hurt, but it did scare me.

His eyes were so close to me, and they were the color of a clear, blue sea.

So pretty, I thought. It was something of a mental escape route away from this situation.

"Sister...is that you...?"

A little late for that, isn't it?! We were just talking just a few hours ago.

"Yeah...?" I replied, despite my exasperation.

"Is it really you?" Johan croaked.

I realized that he must've thought our conversation earlier had been a dream. That explained everything. Of course he'd be surprised to find out that his sister, who he'd thought was in Nevel, had turned up in a border village in Vint.

"It's really me," I confirmed, smiling. "This isn't a dream."

I saw Johan's long eyelashes rise and fall several times as he blinked. After a few seconds, his cheeks flushed so brightly that I almost hallucinated that he was beginning to boil.

Wait, why's he blushing? That's a reaction I couldn't possibly have seen coming.

A lovely smell began to waft through the room, accompanied by the sound of simmering food.

I stirred and checked on the ingredients in the pan. *It's coming along. The vegetables and the meat are softening up nicely.* I wiped sweat from my forehead with one hand, and with the other, scooped out some scum that had collected on the rim of the pot. Standing in front of the fire had caused me to start sweating all over.

A fresh coat of sweat immediately replaced the one I'd wiped away—it

honestly looked like I'd been out for a swim. I reached for the towel I'd set down nearby, and just as I turned around, Lily and Rolf came in.

"Pardon me."

"Argh, it's boiling in here!"

Lily had used string to tie her sleeves up and out of the way, like one would with a kimono. Rolf grumbled about the heat and flung the door wide open. This house's owner was letting us use their kitchen, so I wished that he'd treat it with more care.

"I'm here to help, Lady Mary," said Lily.

"Thank you. Could I get you to keep an eye on the pot?"

"What about me?" asked Rolf.

"I've put some dough to one side there. You can roll it out for me."

"Got it."

The three of us had plenty of experience cooking together in the Khuer village. They knew what they needed to do with only minimal instruction, which made things a lot easier for me, and I was grateful for that. But most of all, it was fun working with them. It was like we were a family cooking together.

At the thought of family, I pictured the face of my little brother. As I stood in silence staring at the metal griddle, I remembered the weird way Johan had acted a few hours before. He'd done all sorts of strange things: first, slapping his cheeks as hard as he could, then running over to me before finally blushing and bolting away.

Since then, I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him. I hoped that he was getting rest somewhere, but I couldn't summon the courage to go and seek him out. He'd run away after one look at my face, so I was frankly a little scared about seeing him again. My heart would shatter if, after tracking him down, he looked annoyed that I'd come. I knew he wouldn't actually do that, but still, the thought frightened me.

"Quit the daydreaming," griped Rolf. I'd been so distracted that I hadn't noticed him walk up beside me. He was holding several thin strips of stretched

dough, soon to be chapati. “Looking at all the dough you’ve made, you’re gonna bake a whole bunch, right? Better get started now or we’ll never finish.”

Rolf barged past me to the griddle. He’d helped me out many times in the kitchen, so he was well acquainted with what to do. First, he checked the griddle’s temperature by holding his hand over it, and then he began to bake the flattened dough.

“Thank you,” I said honestly.

Rolf shot me a sidelong glance. He was frowning, but he didn’t seem angry. If anything, he was probably frustrated. “Don’t zone out when you’re near a fire, ugly.”

Oh. He’s looking out for me, I realized. Rolf had topped off his nice sentiment with something awful, but I decided to ignore that.

Slam.

The door had shut itself again at some point, but now it suddenly crashed open.

“*Ugly?!*” a boy screamed the moment he stepped foot inside the room. “Is there something wrong with your eyes?!”

Everyone turned to stare at the intruder. Lily and Rolf froze in place, looking flabbergasted. “Who are you?” they asked in perfect unison.

Oh, that’s right. The two of them were so busy running all over the village that I never managed to introduce them...

“Uhhh, Johan...?” I said.

“How can you call my sister ugly?!” he screeched. “Every part of her, from every angle, is beautiful! Even the small details! Not just the particulars of her face, but even every strand of hair, even the tips of her nails... In fact, even her very heart! How could you look at true beauty and call it ugly?! So which is it...? Do your eyes not work, or is there just something wrong with your senses?!”

“Your sister...?” Lily looked away from Johan as he spewed excited, rapid-fire questions at Rolf, and then she turned to me.

I was holding my head in my hands. “Yes. This is my brother... I think,” I

mumbled without much confidence.

The sky was pitch-black by the time we'd finished handing out the food and called it a day. I was joined by the chaotic ensemble of Lily, Rolf, and Johan. The silence was deafening.

"Johan," I called softly.

"Y-Yes?!" he squeaked, and his shoulders jumped violently.

"Have some soup. But be careful, it's hot."

"Th-Thank you very much!"

"I made it myself, so it won't be nearly as good as palace food, but it shouldn't taste awful."

"My sister's homemade cooking..." Johan took the bowl I handed him with trembling fingers, then clapped his hands together as though in prayer.

I told myself that his cheeks were only red because they were in the lamplight...and that my ears were just playing tricks on me when I heard a muttered "divine."

"Your brother's a weird guy."

Yeppp. Never before had I been in such absolute agreement with something that Rolf had said. He didn't hate me after all, but I wasn't sure whether to feel relieved about that or hold my head in my hands. Johan had made a few too many questionable remarks for me to just smile and be happy.

And just a few hours ago, I thought that he'd grown out of his feelings for me in the four years we've been apart. I was thinking "Wow, boys grow up so fast" and getting happy and a little sentimental about it! Shows what I know. My brother is starting down a very weird path!!!

And what exactly does he mean about my heart being beautiful?! My heart's actually on the tainted side!!! In the time we've been apart, he's replaced me with an idealized version of his sister. It feels like he's viewing me through the thick lens of his fantasy... Or maybe, delusion... At any rate, I've somehow become the perfect older sister in his eyes.

“Here you go, Lady Mary.” Lily offered me a stir-fried chapati wrap.

I took it, thanking her. *Okay, let’s just eat dinner for now and put my brother’s weirdness to one side. Tomorrow, I’ll need my energy to move around as much as I plan to.*

While munching on the chapati wrap, I glanced at Johan and saw that he was breathing on the soup to cool it down. Johan’s eyes grew wide after he’d tasted a spoonful of the soup. “Delicious,” he said. It seemed like the word had sprung out involuntarily, and it made me happy.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“So you can cook?”

Oh, come to mention it, I’ve never dished anything up for Johan.

“Lady Mary’s meals are always lovely,” said Lily.

“Well, they’re not awful,” Rolf agreed.

Johan furrowed his brows and his head sank. He stared at his feet, still holding the soup bowl in both hands.

“Johan...?”

“I never knew. I didn’t know that you’re good at cooking, or that you had doctor friends... I don’t even know why you’re in Vint. Nothing. I know nothing.” He said this with the voice of a sulking child, and it reminded me of his behavior when he was younger.

With all the time we’ve spent apart, there are plenty more things that we don’t know about each other... Many more than there used to be.

But some things will never change.

“How about...I spend a little time telling you what I’ve been doing.”

Once we’d finished our meals, he and I sat down with cups of tea, and I told my story—what I’d been up to in the four years since Johan had left to study abroad. Gradually, as my story progressed, Johan grew paler, tears welled in Lily’s eyes, and Rolf looked at me in disbelief.

Well... This is a reminder that I’m a bit exceptional as princesses go...

Prince Grouchy's Homecoming

We reached the capital in the middle of the night, and when I entered the palace, most people were already in their bedchambers. The din of footsteps and voices in the corridors gradually grew louder. I didn't like to disturb people's sleep, but I had no choice; this matter couldn't wait until morning.

I had a message sent to my father, and in the meantime, I tidied myself up a little. The warm water I'd requested was effective at cleaning the dirt from my skin, and I had a moment of respite to catch my breath.

Suddenly, a door was flung open with a thunderous crash.

I jumped, startled. Looking over, I saw my brother standing in the doorway, his shoulders heaving. He was staring at me with a scarily grave expression on his face—that carefree smile of his that usually got on my nerves was nowhere to be seen.

I was unsure of what to say to him; the room was awkwardly silent.

Then, without uttering a word, without taking his eyes off me, he ran over and tugged me into a powerful hug. To be honest, I couldn't quite comprehend what was happening. He was squeezing me so tightly that I couldn't breathe. I was about to complain that he was hurting me, but then I realized—his arms were shaking.

"...ach... Nacht...! You're okay... I'm so glad..." he managed to murmur, though his voice was trembling.

I'd reached my arms out to peel him off of me, but seeing him concerned like this, there was no way I could push him away. I wrapped my outstretched arms around him and soothingly patted his back a few times.

"I'm home. Sorry for worrying you."

"That's all right!" he said, lifting his head. His eyes were puffy and wet. "As long as you're okay!"

I'd known that he was fond of me, but I hadn't thought that he'd be so worried... *Actually, thinking back, he has always been a worrier.* I remembered a moment from early childhood when I'd come down with a fever—the look on Licht's face as he'd wept by my bedside had been so distraught.

"You're still such a brother's boy, Licht." An exasperated voice snapped me out of my fond recollections of youth. A man was standing by the doorway wearing a wry smile on his handsome face that looked so similar to my brother's.

"F-Father! I apologize for not only having woken you, but for having you come down here yourself—"

"Oh, don't," he said softly, interrupting my apology. "I'm here to welcome my son home at long last. Let me give you a hug." He threw his arms around both Licht and me. "I'm glad you're all right. Your dearly departed mother would never forgive me if anything had happened to you."

I was far too old to be given a hug by my father, so I found it awfully embarrassing. But my father loved me enough for two—himself and my late mother—and I couldn't bring myself to spurn that affection.

Following that, we engaged in idle chitchat for a time, and then I decided to report on my findings in Grenze. I told them about everything: the disease; the infected villagers who'd been confined to the forest; what Philip, the local lord's son, had done; Johan's triumph; and the ray of hope that Johan's sister, Her Highness Princess Rosemary, had given us.

I endeavored to keep my explanation as clear and objective as possible, but I soon found myself gushing out words with great emotion. I'd experienced the whiplash of so much despair and hope in such a short amount of time... Presenting the information in a collected way proved impossible.

Though I couldn't imagine that it was easy to interpret my voice as it squeaked here and there, my father and brother both listened silently to what I had to say.

My father was leaning back into the dark-brown leather of the plush mahogany armchair. He was clasping his hands above his long legs and his eyes were shut. At first glance, he would've appeared to be asleep, but I knew that

he was listening intently to everything I was saying. On the other hand, my brother was sitting upright, holding excellent posture as he listened, but I expected that half of what I'd said had already passed in one ear and out the other.

When I finished, my father slowly reopened his eyes. "I see..." His whispered voice was low, firm, and regretful. "I acted too late, and that has caused a great number of our people to suffer."

I didn't know how to reply. The deforestation probably had a causative influence on the outbreak in Grenze. If limits on logging operations had been imposed before the forest had been cut down, perhaps there would've been no outbreak. But I understood why my father had delayed action—we'd been indebted to the people in the area around Grenze. Up to this point, that region had fulfilled its role as a base of military operations in the face of hostility from Skelluts. My father hadn't wanted to reward their service by depriving them of long-awaited peace and their first steps toward improved livelihoods. And I couldn't blame him for that, even though I knew that private emotions should be kept out of politics.

"Father..."

"But the time to regret and reflect on my actions will come later. We must act with haste," he declared, rising to his feet. "First, we'll prepare food and supplies for immediate deployment. Oh, and medical practitioners familiar with treating diseases—doctors, herbalists, and the like. Then we'll have to find someone to replace the Giaster family...someone to whom we can temporarily entrust the safety of the region. We must maintain calm order in Grenze and the other western towns. We should leave our investigation of Philip von Giaster and any subsequent confiscation of titles for a later date. Right now, it's imperative that we focus on—"

"Father," I interrupted, "before all of that, I must leave for Grenze myself."

It was not my father but my brother who spoke next. He lowered his brows and looked at me pleadingly. "Nacht?"

I didn't want to make him worry any more than he already had, but I couldn't back down. I'd made a promise to return no matter what. "I have to go to get

my friend...and my savior as well.”

“But Nacht!” cried Licht.

However, my father placed an arm on my brother’s shoulder. “Enough, Licht.”

“But father! If he goes near that forest and catches the disease—”

“Currently inside that dangerous forest are the prince and princess of a neighboring country,” countered my father.

“But that’s...”

“Few would do that for their own subjects... And yet, they are risking their lives to save the people of Vint, their neighbors. Just think about how magnificent and extraordinary that is.” My father’s eyes ordinarily had the appearance of a calm sea, but now a fierce light burned within them. “We mustn’t repay the great debt we owe them with betrayal. Come on, Licht. You’re an honest, straightforward boy, so you understand, don’t you?”

For a brief moment, Licht scrunched his face up, but he slowly blinked and then raised his head. “I do,” he replied, looking my father straight in the eyes.

Satisfied, my father narrowed his eyes and nodded. He stepped out of the room to request that the guard summon the prime minister and the royal guard captain, then returned to the room once more.

I need to get going so that I can prepare to return to Grenze, I thought, and so I began to say my farewells to Licht and my father. However, before I could, my father walked over to me. For some reason, he cupped his hand around my ear and whispered into it, like we were telling secrets.

“Hey, Nacht, can I ask you something that’s been on my mind?”

“Yes...?”

“I know this isn’t the right time, but don’t get mad, okay?”

I nodded, though I had no idea why he’d need such a preface.

“You wouldn’t happen to have fallen in love with the Nevelian princess, would you?”

“What?!” For a second, I failed to comprehend what he’d asked. I wanted to

shout “*Me?! With her?! Don’t mock me!!!*” but I held myself back.

In spite of everything, you’re still a royal prince. Control yourself.

“I mean, there was such a twinkle in your eyes when you were telling us about her,” continued my father. “And you *do* know that you’re blushing right now, don’t you?”

“Well, yes,” I said, flustered, “but that’s just because you caught me a little off guard by saying something so ridiculous... Besides, it’s really not like that.”

I rubbed my apparently red cheeks with the back of my hand and heaved a sigh.

To be sure, she *was* beautiful. And not just her appearance; the fierce light in her eyes was captivating. But despite that...no, *because* of that, I felt like it was wrong to harbor romantic inclinations or other feelings of that nature toward her.

She was a ray of deliverance shining through the dawn clouds, rising in tandem with the morning light. She was so dazzling... *Divine*, even. The sort that mustn’t be touched by mere mortals.

“Really? I think it would be wonderful for you and the princess to be together... For each of our countries and for ourselves personally as well.”

“She deserves better than a small-minded man like me. And besides...” My words trailed off.

“And besides...?” my father prompted, looking at me.

However, I shook my head, choosing not to complete my sentence. “It’s nothing.”

In my memory, I saw the man who’d faithfully guarded me on our journey to the palace. As soon as he’d finished escorting me back to the capital, he’d swiveled his horse around, not pausing even a second to rest, and vanished into the darkness.

I didn’t doubt that he was concerned about Johan, whom we’d left behind in the forest, but I felt like a *different* reason was spurring him to hurry. I didn’t want to misconstrue what he’d meant by his “ray of hope.” But at the same

time, when I remembered the blush on the princess's face as she'd caught sight of him, I couldn't help but think that their relationship was built on more than just trust.

Wondrous Happiness for the Reincarnated Princess

“And the beast said, ‘Stay away from me, or else you’ll cut yourself on my sharp claws and fangs.’ He hid his sharp claws behind his back and smiled. But the princess saw through his smile to the sadness beneath.”

I turned the page of the picture book. Then, I heard the peaceful breathing distinctive of those who’ve fallen asleep. I peeled my eyes away from the next page and lifted my head—a little girl was lying on the bed, her eyes closed, her head sinking into the pillow, and her small belly rising and falling in a regular rhythm. Only a few moments before she’d been jumping up and down asking, “What happens next?!” but it seemed that, at some point, she had drifted off to the land of dreams.

I smiled and shut the book. After pulling the blanket up to her shoulders, I gently brushed the hair out of her face. She was sleeping well. She’d utter a murmur occasionally, which I thought was cute, but she showed no signs of waking up. It was hard to think of her as the same girl who’d suffered feverish nightmares just a few days before.

After taking in the pleasant sight of her sleeping face, I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Good night and sweet dreams.” Picking up the lantern, I quietly opened the door.

The cool air tickled my skin when I set foot outside. I much preferred this to the midday heat, but the extremely humid night air that dampened my hair and skin still wasn’t comfortable.

I quietly shut the door and began walking away. As I peered up at the cloudless night sky, I saw the big, round moon. Tonight, the moonlight was bright enough that I could’ve managed to find my way around even without the lantern.

“It’s full...”

The light, cream-colored moon looked somehow different from the moon I’d

see from Nevel's palace. I wasn't sure whether that was because I was in a different environment or whether I was just feeling homesick.

The people waiting for me back at the palace popped into my head...as well as the face of Sir Leonhart, who had come and gone for just a brief moment a few days ago.

I wonder if he's reached the capital yet? He will have pulled out all the stops to get there fast, so maybe he's giving his body a rest right now.

I wanna know how he's doing... I wanna see him... I couldn't stop myself from thinking things like that. Oh no. Everyone is working themselves half to death, and all I can think about is myself..

I stopped walking and heaved a sigh as I gazed at the full moon. *Get a grip*, I thought, lightly slapping my own cheeks.

And just then...

Rustle. Something stirred in a bush.

"Huh?!"

I pointed the lantern toward the source of the noise. Nobody was around. Most of the exhausted Khuer had gone to sleep, and the rest of them were by their patients' bedsides. The majority of the Western Frontier Knights had succumbed to the disease and were in bed recovering. In other words, basically nobody would be outside walking around at this time of night.

Oh, God! I thought we'd be all right not posting lookouts because nobody would be brave enough to enter the forest and expose themselves to the disease...

The area was completely silent except for the occasional cry from an insect or rustling leaf, so the thumping of my heart pounded noisily in the backs of my ears.

Rustle. The same noise again. Next, I heard the crunching sounds of something walking over the carpet of leaves.

The sounds are too regular and heavy to come from an animal. It has to be a person.

A voice in my head said, “*Run! What’s a puny little girl like you gonna be able to do?*” But my body refused to obey my mental instructions, and I remained still. No, I *couldn’t* move. It was like my feet had been sewn to the ground.

Even though my whole body was trembling, I lifted the lantern up high. Maybe that was my instincts kicking in, or perhaps it was just my morbid curiosity. My eyes were fixed on one spot, waiting to discern the identity of the approaching figure, and I couldn’t even blink.

At last, through the veil of darkness, a tall figure appeared.

My heart nearly leaped out of my chest. A scream rose from my lungs but got stuck in my throat, which had dried up, so no sound emerged except for a brief yelp.

Spotting the light of my lantern, the tall figure raised his head. Beneath the shadow of his hood, our eyes locked.

“Princess?”

He mumbled it quietly, but I heard him. It wouldn’t have mattered how quietly he’d whispered; I could never mistake *his* voice. He was so important to me.

“Sir...Leon?” I nervously called the name of the man I loved.

He threw back his hood and his stiff black hair tumbled over his face. I saw the shapely bridge of his nose and his dignified eyebrows, and his chiseled cheeks seemed to have sunken in a little bit. There was an inconcealable look of fatigue to his manly, attractive features, but that didn’t detract from his seductive appeal—in fact, it enhanced his allure to dangerous levels...

I saw myself reflected in his pitch-black almond eyes, which were gently narrowed. A weighted sigh spilled through his lovely lips, and the thoroughly relieved expression on his face instantly gripped my heart.

“Thank the heavens...” he said. “You’re all right.”

It’s Sir Leonhart... It’s really him!

My heart swelled with ecstatic joy. I’d been so scared that even my fingertips had gone pale, but now warmth slowly returned to them. My cheeks felt hot.

My body was shaking, just as it had been earlier, although for a different reason.

“I-I’m g-gla...” I can’t get my words out properly. Oh my God, so embarrassing!

Sir Leonhart walked over to me, and instead of laughing at me for stuttering, he prompted me to continue with a kind look in his eyes.

“I’m glad you’re okay as well, Sir Leon...” I managed to say in spite of my stammering. “Welcome back.”

He nodded, smiled sweetly, and bashfully replied, “It’s good to be back.”

Don’t look at me like that. It sends my heart into overdrive and makes it even harder to form words!

It was the person that I’d been dying to see for so, so long, and he was now right in front of my eyes. The reality of the situation was too much for me to process all at once, and the unexpected, happy scene before me seemed as transient as a bubble liable to burst at the slightest touch. I couldn’t help but lose my nerve.

We fumbled our way through a stop-and-go conversation. I told him how I’d met up with Johan and how he was doing just fine except for an injury above his eye. Sir Leonhart told me that he’d delivered Prince Nacht to the capital safe and sound.

We stood facing each other, just a meter of space between us, but the conversation died out. Sir Leonhart looked me up and down in silence. I could feel him staring at the top of my head, and it made me fidget.

Sir Leonhart turned his head slightly to one side and said, “You’ve grown, Princess.”

“Oh, er, have I...?” It was hard for me to tell, partially because I hadn’t gotten a spare minute to keep track of how much I was growing. It was also a hard thing to gauge because the company I kept consisted almost exclusively of tall people. The only person shorter than me was Lily.

Still, I was happy to learn that I’d grown. The gap between myself and Sir Leonhart had shrunk, even if just by a tiny bit, and that was cause for

celebration.

“You have... Er, well...” Sir Leonhart cupped his chin with his hand in thought and glanced toward me, his face filled with uncertainty, although I wasn’t sure why.

There was a bright twinkle in his narrowed eyes, and the thought that his gaze was pointed my way left me feeling like I didn’t know what to do with myself. He whispered something, but unfortunately, it was too quiet for me to make out.

I grasped around for a new topic to talk about while my cheeks caught fire and grew redder. But my brain sputtered and groaned and failed to find one. *Oh no, I’m starting to sweat.* “Ummm... Sir Leon!”

“Yes?”

With no other options available, my brain reached into the ether and plucked out the most dumb-sounding topic I could think up. “Hungry! You must be hungry.” The moment I’d spoken the words aloud, I realized how awful my choice had been.

Wow, great job, Rose...

But then...

I heard a barely audible grumbling noise.

What was that? I thought, cocking my head.

Sir Leonhart looked away awkwardly, covering his mouth with one of his large hands and his stomach with the other. He tilted his head down, and I could see a slight red tinge to his cheeks, which at last informed me what the noise had been.

“Pardon me,” he said bashfully.

I didn’t know how to express the way I felt when I heard that. I deserved praise for managing to stop myself from screaming out loud, *“So so so cuuute! What lottery did I win to get to see Sir Leonhart embarrassed about his stomach rumbling?! Thank you, God!!!”*

I withheld my urge to scream to the heavens and instead chuckled.

Sir Leonhart laughed as well, none the wiser that the girl in front of him was trying to sear the image of his embarrassed smile into her eternal memory.

I really am sorry for how crude I am...

Staring at the heated griddle, I gulped. The hand that held the thinly stretched, round chapati dough was trembling. I'd baked dozens of these before—actually, hundreds, counting the ones I'd made while living in the Khuer village—but I felt more nervous than I had even on my first attempt.

Calm down, Rosemary. Just do it the way you always do, and nothing will go wrong. Probably. Maybe. Uhhh, so when I slide them in, I always do it from a forty-five-degree angle, right?

After chanting in my head to do it the same way I always had, I still managed to overthink and get hung up on overly specific details. After a couple of deep breaths, I braced myself to finally start cooking, but just then...

A voice called out from behind me, as though it had been waiting for this exact moment. "Princess?"

"Yeshue?!"

No, what a weird scream! I was startled by my own sneeze-like voice, and at the same time, the wheat flour dough slipped through my fingers and splatted onto the griddle, landing perfectly.

"Wh-Wh-What is it?" I swiveled my rigid body around and saw Sir Leonhart moping right behind me. When I looked up at his face, I saw that he was wearing a slightly awkward smile.

"Oh, er... I was wondering if there's anything I can do to help?"

If we start cooking together, my heart will give out in seconds! I thought, then immediately refused his offer. "No, it's fine! Please, sit yourself down!"

"Oh," Sir Leonhart mumbled. As I watched him walk away, I thought that he seemed a little disappointed. *Ahh, he's so cute when the wind leaves his sails.*

I felt guilty for spurning his kind offer, but after considering my heart's lack of resilience and its vulnerability toward Sir Leonhart, it was a necessary decision.

If Sir Leonhart were standing by my side, cooking would be the very least of my worries.

While I internally praised myself for my wise decision, I had a realization. *Hang on... We totally sounded like newlyweds a second ago, didn't we?*

"Can I help out?"

"No, you just sit down."

That's an exchange straight out of a newlywed textbook!

"Ah!!!" I clasped at my cheeks with both hands and squirmed. Flour was rubbing off of my fingers and onto my face, but so what?

Wait! Does this mean I went through such an important milestone without even realizing it? That's not even funny. Gimme a do-over. Somebody, please, press quick load! I promise I'll save all the visuals and audio! I'll set all five senses to max sensitivity and savor the moment, so please just do that for me!!!

Oh, what a waste... At the very least, I'll try to remember every little detail about today. The weather, the temperature, the humidity, the... What else? Oh, and this lovely smell... Wait a minute...

I sniffed, and only then did I remember the hot griddle right in front of me that I hadn't been paying attention to. "Oh no!!!"

I hurriedly flipped the dough over, and the edges were charred.

"Ohhh..." I groaned pathetically and my head sank. *I messed up.*

Most of the dough had escaped burning, so it would still be edible, but it was a far cry from the perfect result that I'd hoped for. Although, having a minor failure did seem to calm my nerves a bit.

I sautéed onions in a frying pan while simmering some chickpeas. When the onions became translucent, I added garlic and ginger. As the ingredients sizzled in the pan, they released an amazing, gluttony-inducing aroma. After judging the timing, I threw sliced tomatoes and chicken meat into the mix. *Ooh, smells amazing.* I continued frying while giving the sizzling pan a few gentle shakes.

This should be plenty tasty enough on its own...but here's where I break out the present I got from the Khuer: spiiicesss!

Okay, I tried to do a Doraemon impression there and it just fell flat.

I added turmeric and three other spices to the mix and fried it all some more. A bit later, I added the appropriate amount of water and the boiled chickpeas. After a little more boiling plus some salt and pepper for flavor adjustments...it was ready! My chicken and chickpea tomato curry with ad hoc chapati.

Oh, not the right meal for nighttime? Well, sure. I'd have *loved* to be able to dish up some boiled rice soaked in tea with sea breams, like a good wife...but the ingredients just weren't there, so what more could I have done?

When I turned around, my eyes met Sir Leonhart's. *Has he been watching me cook this whole time?* I wondered. The thought made me feel embarrassed, so I broke eye contact and then picked up a bowl of curry with the slightly burned chapati. I placed the food down in front of Sir Leonhart.

"What is this dish called?" he asked.

"Um, curry. It's tomato curry."

"My," said Sir Leonhart, nodding. "Tomato curry," he repeated, sounding very interested. After clapping his hands together and saying, "Let's eat," he picked up a spoon.

Ohhh, my heart's pounding so much it hurts. To distract myself, I poured water into a cup and placed it within Sir Leonhart's reach. I flicked my eyes toward him at the exact moment that the spoon entered his gorgeous mouth. I slammed my eyes shut, too scared to watch his reaction.

There was a silence that lasted a few seconds, broken by Sir Leonhart's soft voice. "It's delicious."

I tried to cut myself down to size by telling myself that my ears were playing tricks on me, or that I was only hearing what I wanted to hear... But hope overpowered my other emotions, and I nervously reopened my eyes. Sir Leonhart scooped a bit of chicken and some chickpeas up with his spoon, opened his mouth wide, and carried the spoon inside. As he chewed, the usual relaxed look in his eyes was replaced by a twinkle.



He ripped off a bit of the chapati and placed it in his mouth, calling it delicious as well. He must've had quite the appetite because the curry and the chapati rapidly disappeared from the bowls. Despite his speed, he still managed to eat everything in a dignified way, which amazed me.

"There's more if you'd like some..."

At once, he thrust his bowl toward me. "Yes please," he said.

I was a little surprised and so very happy. I dolloped more curry into his bowl, handed it over, and then sat down in the seat opposite him to admiringly observe him eating. I enjoyed watching the bowl empty.

I should've made more than three chapatis...

Back in my old world, there'd been a commercial that had said "I love you even more when you eat a lot," and now I get it. Nothing beats a glutton for a crush!

The person I loved was smiling right in front of me. That was enough to delight me on its own, so nothing could be as heartwarming as knowing that he was smiling because of the meal that *I'd* cooked. I switched my brain off and enjoyed the happy moment for a time.

I waited for Sir Leonhart to finish his meal, and then I began to boil some water.

Sir Leonhart stood and brought the dirty dishes and cutlery over to me. "Thank you," he said, smiling. He seemed slightly bashful.

"Don't mention it," I replied, feeling my heart flutter.

When I tried to take his dishes, he politely declined. "I can't let you do everything."

The sight of him doing the washing, his sleeves rolled up, captivated me at once. *I can't be the only one who thinks that men with rolled-up sleeves look more handsome, or sexy even, can I?*

"It's a rather curious meal, this curry."

"Oh, er... I suppose so." *Whoops. I was so entranced by his muscly arms that I*

nearly missed what he said.

“The smell and the spiciness are unusual, but that’s what makes it so appetizing. And it goes perfectly with that flatbread. It truly was delicious.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

I appreciated the compliments, but they left me feeling bashful. I turned my eyes away from Sir Leonhart and busied myself by using the boiled water to make tea.

“So it’s not just sweets that you’re good at making.”

“Th-Thank you for saying so...” I was feeling so embarrassed that my words came out in a whisper.

This is exactly what I wanted... Why am I so antsy? It’s like I feel so awkward that I just wanna bolt.

Once Sir Leonhart had finished washing the dishes, I handed him a cup of tea. He dried his hands with a cloth and then reached over to take the cup from me, but he stopped himself.

Finding that strange, I glanced down. Sir Leonhart was staring at my hands, which were covered in tiny cuts and scrapes and had chipped fingernails.

I knew that, as a girl, I should’ve shown more care to my hands. When I was in the palace, the maids would perform a thorough beauty treatment on my hands and nails. However, since I’d left on my journey, I hadn’t given them the same attention—they quickly became scuffed unless I remembered to take a moment and look after them.

A wave of embarrassment flooded over me, but a different kind than before. I wished that I could pull my hands away and hide them behind my back, but I couldn’t because I was holding a cup.

After a while of me standing there awkwardly, Sir Leonhart gently took the tea.

Relieved, I immediately tried to hide my hands, but Sir Leonhart was too quick—he caught them in his own. In the blink of an eye, he’d placed the cup down on the table and scooped my hands up. His touch was so tender, and he held

my hands with such care that I wasn't sure what to do.

"Sir Leon...?"

"Princess, I..." Sir Leonhart started, but his sentence came to an unnatural stop. The words that would have followed never left his lips, vanishing soundlessly into the air.

His brows were deeply furrowed, and it seemed like he was searching desperately for the right words. But he must not have found them, because in the end, his head just drooped. This was unusual for him; he normally had such great posture. He lowered his gaze and shook his head slightly from side to side.

Seeing that, I realized that he'd been trying to comfort me. He was trying to cheer me up, thinking that I was upset by the poor state of my hands.

You're so kind. You're doing this even though it's in no way your fault that my hands have gotten this bad.

"It's all right. To tell the truth, I'm not particularly bothered about this... Or rather, they wouldn't have gotten to this state if I *had* been bothered." I put on a wry smile as I spoke, but after I finished, I realized that I'd screwed up. *I hoped he'd laugh it off, but he's a kind person, so saying something so self-critical will only make him worry more.*

"That's not what I'm saying!" Sir Leonhart denied, raising his voice.

I gasped. His response was so intense that I felt my body draw taut.

Seeing my reaction, Sir Leonhart gasped like he'd just realized what he'd done. Regret showed on his face. "Forgive me..." he said, his voice tortured. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

I bit down on my lip and slowly shook my head. *I didn't mean to cause you to make a face like that either.*

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

Then Sir Leonhart chuckled slightly. His brows were lowered, and the laugh seemed to be directed at himself. His facial expression was unusually soft, and I felt my body relax. We laughed together, my hands still in his, our gazes locked.

"I should be ashamed of myself," he said. "I was so afraid of upsetting you

that I couldn't summon the courage to say my thoughts out loud, and in doing so, I instead made you worry. In that case, I ought to have just said it." After a pause, he started again.

"Princess."

"Yes?"

"If what I'm about to say upsets you even slightly, will you let me know?"

"I will," I promised.

Sir Leonhart breathed a sigh of relief.

Wow, I haven't made this easy for him, I thought, but I also felt glad. I adore that you're choosing to hang on my every word.

Sir Leonhart lifted my left hand and ran his thumb across a healing cut. "This one looks recent..."

"Er, when I was cooking...I was peeling vegetables, but I wasn't watching what I was doing..."

He flipped my hand over and indicated a large cut that ran across my palm. "And this one?" he asked.

"Oh, I got that one when I was gathering ingredients for medicines in the Khuer village. The leaves are sharp." That one hadn't been deep, so it had mostly healed.

"And this... A burn?" There was a faint red mark on my right hand near the wrist, which Sir Leonhart's keen eyes had spotted.

"I was stirring a medical decoction, and the brew spat up on me. Just a little bit though."

Sir Leonhart ran his fingers across each cut and every scrape on my hands, examining them all. I felt horribly guilty when I saw the worried look on his face, but his examination continued.

"Princess," he murmured. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"Sir Leon..."

"I'd surely sound more dashing if I told you that you would never have gotten

hurt had I been with you,” he said, laughing. He was probably trying to lighten the mood, but his expression was tinged with bits of pain and regret. “But I can’t claim that—I know that you wouldn’t have changed your actions, no matter who was by your side.”

I couldn’t deny it. Even if Sir Leonhart had accompanied me on my journey, I wouldn’t have been able to off-load all the responsibility onto him and sit around doing nothing. By my own code, that would’ve been unacceptable.

“I have neither the power nor the desire to hinder your fervent attempts to help others... And so, Princess, I have only one thing to say to you.”

Silently, I waited for Sir Leonhart to continue. I was prepared for a telling-off. After all, I’d taken everything into my own hands and had punched far above my weight. Things had ultimately worked out, but a single misstep could’ve potentially spelled my death, and that would’ve made such a huge mess for so many people...too many to brush off as “you reap what you sow.”

Wait... What if he stops getting angry at me after this? What if he says he’s had enough and distances himself from me? That horrible outcome entered my mind, and unconsciously, I clenched my fists. I held my eyes firmly shut and bit down on my lip.

“Well done.”

It took a moment to process what he’d said. “Huh?”

It was so unlike what I’d imagined that I almost doubted we were speaking the same language. I opened my eyes and found them drawn up to Sir Leonhart’s face. He was smiling, and in his eyes, there wasn’t a trace of resignation or disappointment, just pure kindness.

“I don’t know exactly what happened on your journey, but looking at your hands tells me the answer.” With his own large hands, Sir Leonhart gently cupped mine. “These are the hands of a hardworking girl.”

The heat from his firm palms warmed my tensed hands. The warmth permeated through every part of my body, melting away my nerves, my poker face, stripping everything away until all that remained was *me*, the real me...the uncool, pathetic girl whose love for Sir Leonhart bordered on creepy.

“I know that it’s boorish to tell a woman to take pride in her scars... But please, don’t be ashamed of them.”

“Even when they look like this?” I asked, trying to laugh, but my voice trembled as it came out. Both my nose and my eyes began to burn.

Sir Leonhart tilted his head in a slight nod. “Even in a state like that. To me, these hands are more beautiful, more precious than anything else in this world.”

As soon as I heard those words, the dam holding back my tears broke.

Seeing the large droplets fall down my face, Sir Leonhart panicked. “Princess! I’m sor—”

“No, don’t...” I forced my faltering voice out, shaking my head. “Don’t be sorry.” I sounded so terribly nasal, but I had to get the words out—this was the one thing that I couldn’t let him misunderstand. “I’m so happy to hear that.”

Through my tear-blurred vision, I could see Leonhart’s eyes grow as wide as saucers. After a few stunned blinks, he narrowed them tenderly. He reached across with his large hands and gently patted my head.

I’m glad, Sir Leon... So glad that you’re the man I fell in love with.

Prince Grouchy's Audience

The moment I stepped inside the room, I was hit by the powerful smell of medicine, and I barely managed to stop myself from choking.

"It's been too long, Prince Nacht."

Turning my gaze toward the voice, I first saw a large bed. Then, my eyes met those of an old man who was sitting up precariously, supported by a stack of pillows behind him. The hair on his head that he'd combed back and the beard on his chin were both white, and inside sunken sockets, the whites of his eyes had yellowed. His white clothes had been tailored with comfort rather than style in mind, and the hands that poked out of the sleeves were skeletal. They looked like withered tree branches. Wrinkles covered his face like tree rings, and though there was still some slight resemblance to the man I once knew, I couldn't believe that it was really him... No, it would be more accurate to say that I didn't *want* to believe.

"It has, Lord Giaster."

The complete metamorphosis of this once-great man shocked me to the core. He was Heinz von Giaster, the head of the Giaster family, which ruled over the entire western region of Vint, including Grenze.

I stood there stupidly, unable to conceal my astonishment.

Lord Giaster smiled wryly, and when he did, I recognized the kind, grandfatherly look in his eyes, like the look of a man comforting a bawling child. "I hope you'll forgive me... I wish I could've made myself more presentable."

I awkwardly apologized for my impolite staring. "Of course... I'm sorry for my reaction."

Lord Giaster gestured toward a seat by his bedside, and I sat down. The stench of medicine grew stronger when I drew nearer to him, and I noticed another smell mixed in... Something similar to when I'd visited my mother shortly before she'd passed. Behind this quiet, smiling old man, I hallucinated

that I could see Death standing at the ready, his reaping scythe poised to fall. I'd been told that he had heart problems, but his condition seemed far worse than I'd imagined.

"I thought I'd still be able to give the young ones a run for their money, but these days, it's gotten to the point that I can't even sit up on my own. I should never have gotten old."

Lord Giaster wore a perfectly calm expression on his face, and I couldn't sense any actual feelings of jealousy or envy toward the splendors of youth. When I'd last seen him only a few years ago, his body had been as tough as a young man's, and his skill with a sword had been exemplary. But now, he couldn't even sit up by himself, let alone hold a sword, and...he didn't seem upset by it. It was like he'd accepted his fate.

However, his smile vanished suddenly, and a sorrowful look appeared in his eyes. He slowly raised his right hand from atop the blanket. Struggling to find the strength to move, he uncurled his trembling fingers in a pitifully sluggish motion. He stared at his empty hand.

"But, since ending up like this, there are some things that have become clear to me. My son, Philip... All those years, and I never actually understood him." There was a regretful tone in his choked-up voice.

I don't know what sort of relationship the fit and healthy lord had with his sickly son...but if they'd been closer, perhaps things wouldn't have come to this.

At that point, I shook my head to clear out my foolish thoughts. *I can't change things by worrying over "perhaps" and "maybe." It's already happened, and there's no going back.*

"Lord Giaster, have you heard about what your son has done...?"

"I have. My foolish son has caused great misery for so many of my people. I can't apologize enough. I am Philip von Giaster's father and the head of his family, so I share responsibility for his crimes. I humbly submit to any punishment."

"The punishment will be decided later. I imagine you'll hear soon."

My father had elected to prioritize our response to the disease, but it

wouldn't be long before Philip's punishment was decided. He would probably escape the death penalty since he'd been attempting to fulfill his duty as acting lord and prevent the spread of the disease. Confiscation of his title and banishment to a temple seemed the likely outcome. The Giaster family would survive, but lordship over the western region would probably transfer to someone else.

The thought of how hard it would be to find a suitable replacement for Lord Giaster gave me a migraine. He was not only an exceptionally talented individual, but popular as well, adored by his subordinates and his people.

Lord Giaster lowered his eyes and bowed his head. "Very well."

For a while, neither of us spoke. When Lord Giaster raised his head, his expression had become more dignified—he looked less like a mild-mannered old man now and more like a lord. "Also, Your Highness, if you'll permit, I'd like to ask about the current state of the disease outbreak."

"Currently, everyone presenting symptoms has been quarantined in a village in the southwestern forest. During the time that I was in the capital procuring food and medicine, Johan remained in the forest caring for the sick."

"Prince Johan..." said Lord Giaster, his voice pained, and he furrowed his brows.

Johan had a much closer relationship with Lord Giaster than I did. It was impossible to imagine how Lord Giaster must've felt when he'd learned that Johan, whom he cherished like a nephew—or maybe a son—was somewhere dangerous.

"It was a new kind of disease, and there was little chance that the medicine I brought from our existing stores would have any effect. But just when it seemed like we were out of options, a princess from a neighboring country arrived to help. We found a ray of hope."

Lord Giaster's eyes widened. He must not have expected to hear that. "A foreign princess... Do you mean Prince Johan's sister?"

I nodded and continued my account. "Yes. Princess Rosemary brought not just an effective medicine, but also a host of skilled doctors. On top of that, she's

personally volunteering her services to treat the sick as we speak.”

“The princess is treating the sick herself?!” His shock at this latest news made his surprise at the last seem like nothing. He must’ve shouted too loudly, because he clutched at his chest and suffered a coughing fit. I rubbed his back as he took several deep breaths. When the fit subsided, he thanked me and leaned back into the wall of cushions behind him.

He let out a long sigh and smiled. “The mature little prince Johan would always look more like a normal boy his age whenever his sister came up in conversation... I always loved that. I’ve heard that his sister is a beautiful, kindhearted girl...but she appears to be an even greater person than I imagined.”

I knew how much Johan loved his sister, so I’d taken everything he’d said about her with a grain of salt. I hadn’t thought that he’d been fabricating how great she was, but I’d suspected that his tellings might’ve contained slight exaggerations.

However, she proved me wrong within seconds of our first meeting.

“Are those skilled doctors you mentioned employed by Nevel’s royal family?”

“No. I haven’t been told specifically, but I don’t think so. Johan wasn’t aware of the effective medicine, so I think she hired doctors from another country.”

Lord Giaster paused for a few moments to think. Then it appeared that an idea struck him, and he looked at me. “Would that other country be Flanmer, by any chance?”

“Hmm, it could be. That’s the direction she came from.”

“I knew it,” Lord Giaster whispered, and he beamed from ear to ear, laughing out loud.

I felt confused, unsure of what thought he’d had. “My lord?”

“Pardon me. I’m too old to be getting so excited, I know.”

Now I was even *less* sure what he meant, and I grew even more confused.

Lord Giaster smiled at me. “Sorry. I simply didn’t expect the girl I thought was a saint from a fairy tale to actually be the hero of an adventure story.”

“A hero? The princess?”

She had seemed like a saint or a princess straight from the pages of a fairy tale to me as well. But Lord Giaster was saying otherwise. She was a hero, he claimed.

“I heard once that there’s a tribe of doctors that dwell somewhere deep in the mountains of Flanmer—a proudly independent tribe that has no master. They can apparently outclass the royal doctors and herbalists with their exceptional skills and bountiful knowledge. Sightings of these people are scarce, so some claim that no such tribe exists...but if they’ve now chosen to accept Her Highness as their master...”

“That sounds preposterous,” I said in blank amazement.

Lord Giaster nodded. “Yes. Hence why I call her a hero.”

I couldn’t think up any refutation.

Taking the initiative, she’d sought out a fantastical tribe of doctors and had won their loyalty. She’d had the courage to knowingly plunge herself into a disease-ridden village. Also, she had a kind heart; the crisis hadn’t even been in her own country, but the plight still moved her to action. Those seemed to be the essential criteria for a hero.

I remained in a half-dumbfounded state for the rest of the meeting, and before I’d realized, it was time for me to leave.

I stayed in Grenze for some time after that, directing the supplies that arrived from the capital toward the village and arranging for further provisions as they became necessary. I periodically modified the shifts of the doctors and herbalists after checking on their well-being, organized the information I had available, and assisted the marquis who’d arrived to serve as acting lord in Grenze, all the while monitoring the town.

Occasionally, the number of sick quarantined in the forest village would increase, but most of the afflicted continued down the road to recovery.

After one month, the last of the sick made a full recovery and returned to Grenze, along with my friend Johan and our adorable hero.

On that day, cheers could be heard on every street in Grenze.

Friends, lovers, and neighbors whom the townsfolk had thought they'd never see alive again were about to return, fit and healthy. Who wouldn't celebrate that?

The gates opened, and carriages rolled through. A carriage stopped, its door opened, and as soon as the person inside came into view, one of the townsfolk ran over. Another went after, and then another, until soon the area by the gate was crowded with people.

Everyone was hugging each other and cheering with joy.

I was watching from a distance, so I couldn't make out the looks on their faces, but no doubt each person was wearing a bright smile. Watching such a touching scene, I felt my own lips curl up slightly.

After a while, the crowd parted to allow passage of the Western Frontier Knights, who'd arrived on horseback. Then, flanked by the knights in escort, a single carriage passed through the gate.

"Princeeeess!!!" a child yelled at the top of her lungs. Nearby adults hurriedly tried to shush her, but the child shouted once more regardless. Spotting a chance for fun, younger children nearby took up the cry themselves. An adult's stern warning couldn't hope to quell a child's curiosity.

The knights and the carriage came to a halt to avoid trampling the young children that had swarmed them. The curtain on the carriage's window was pulled to one side, revealing the person within. After squinting, I managed to spy her waving hand.

A second later, the crowd erupted into boisterous cheering.

The person waving her hand from inside the carriage was the princess that the children had been shouting for at the top of their lungs—the first princess of the Kingdom of Nevel, Her Highness Rosemary von Velfalt.

She'd become the talk of the town over the past month, with tales of her deeds recited in every part of Grenze. She'd gallantly ridden across borders in

our time of need, and despite her royal pedigree, she had personally devoted herself to treating the sick. The villagers must have seen her as their savior or as a saint. Her and Johan's popularity in Grenze had soared and was still climbing. I was sure that minstrels would soon pick up her tale and carry it throughout the country in their songs.

That idea left me with quite an unusual feeling—a mix of elation and nervousness. It was like I was inside a page of a story as it was happening. I stood up straight, feeling that the occasion demanded it.

“Prince Nacht.” A guard called out to me, snapping me out of my thoughts.

When I looked down, I saw that the carriage had begun to move once more; I stepped inside from the balcony so that I could greet her when she arrived. Before long, she was in front of me, smiling so sweetly that I couldn't picture her as anything less than a fairy-tale princess.

In the back of my mind, I thought, *An adventure tale with her as the protagonist would surely be like no other. If it's out there, I'd love to give it a read.*

I wanted to give the new arrivals a chance to rest up, but Johan requested an audience with Lord Giaster. Princess Rosemary and one of the doctors asked to join as well, and I was more than happy to accommodate them.

The several dozen doctors who'd returned with Princess Rosemary all had distinctive ash-gray hair and honey-colored eyes. They called themselves the Khuer tribe, and just as Lord Giaster had suspected, they were the tribe of doctors living deep within a mountain range in Flanmer.

Even a layman like me can tell that Lord Giaster's health is in serious trouble, but a miraculous tribe of doctors just might be able to help. That was my sliver of hope.

Johan's jaw dropped when he saw how different Lord Giaster looked, but he quickly switched back to his usual, pleasant smile. “It's been too long, Lord Heinz.”

Lord Giaster smiled happily and took Johan's hand. “Look how you've grown...

You're a fine man now, I see."

Johan smirked mischievously. "Finer than you?"

Lord Giaster threw his head back and laughed. "In ten years' time, maybe."

Princess Rosemary smiled at the friendly, relaxed banter.

Lord Giaster heard the quiet laugh that she failed to stifle, and he looked over toward her. "Prince Johan, would this charming young lady happen to be...?"

"My sister."

"It's an honor to meet you. I'm Rosemary von Velfalt."

"It's a pleasure to meet such a beautiful princess," the old lord said. "I am Heinz von Giaster. I've heard much about you from Prince Johan."

At that, Princess Rosemary smiled stiffly. "Don't take what he says too seriously. He likes to make his sister shine in a good light, so I imagine he slightly exaggerates things."

"I don't exaggerate," Johan protested. "My sister really *is* amazing."

"See? Like that."

Lord Giaster narrowed his eyes and smiled while watching the amicable exchange between the siblings.

Our audience was kept short out of consideration for the exertion on Lord Giaster and his health, but it was a pleasant experience from start to finish. Lord Giaster's cheerful laugh stuck in my mind the most. When he looked at Johan and Princess Rosemary, he seemed like a grandfather adoring his grandchildren. I felt entirely relaxed after that heartwarming audience, and I felt like Lord Giaster's kindness had rubbed off on me.

However, after we'd moved into another room, the mood instantly darkened and took a grave turn.

"We can help reduce the pain slightly, but...we can't cure him." The doctor—a Khuer man who'd introduced himself as Wolf—left no room for misinterpretation, and he struggled to keep the anguish out of his facial expression. "His heart disease has gotten quite bad. He's past the point where

medicine or changes to his diet will make any difference. Plus, his other organs have started to fail, and his age doesn't help. Recovery seems unlikely."

Hearing that Lord Giaster couldn't be cured, I panicked.

I'd painted a happy picture in my head of how things would turn out. Truly, I'd imagined that Wolf would smile and save the day by saying *"It won't be easy, and it'll take time, but I'll get him back to good health."*

It didn't even cross my mind how optimistic and egotistical that thought had been.

"Can't you do something?" I almost said, about to hound him, spurred on by a sense of urgency. But I managed to hold myself back at the last second, and that was because I saw how tightly Wolf was clenching his fists.

It should've been easy to realize who here was most upset with the outcome. I couldn't imagine how difficult it must've been for a doctor to have to say that they couldn't help a patient.

However, although I was struggling to accept the facts, Johan was staring down with a grave look on his face. There were no tears in the deep sea blue of his eyes, but that made him look all the more sad. His gaze was fixed on a spot on the floor diagonally down from him and he remained perfectly still.

Princess Rosemary gently took his hand.

"I...I want you to help with his pain, if he'll let you," Johan managed to say, squeezing his sister's hand tightly. "Personally, at least, I want the time he has left to be peaceful."

After listening to Johan's choked plea, Wolf nodded slowly.

But although disease had ravaged Lord Giaster's body, it hadn't touched his dauntless nature. When we returned to him to propose the suggested treatment, he laughed the idea off, saying, "Without pain, how will I know whether I'm alive or dead?"

"That's Lord Heinz all right," said Johan with a smile that was bitter and pained...and just a little happy.

Prince Grouchy's Resolve

"Morning, Nacht!"

The door flew open with a bang, and my brother, brimming with energy as always, came inside. He was smiling from ear to ear, although I had no idea what he had to be so happy about.

You could at least knock, I grumbled in my mind, and then I sighed and groaned an unenthusiastic greeting. "Good morning, Licht."

At this point, I was back in the capital. Johan had come too, of course, but so had Princess Rosemary.

She hadn't seemed thrilled when I'd asked her to accompany us to the capital. She'd told me that she'd prefer to keep a low profile as her presence in Vint wasn't the result of an official invitation. She must've felt guilty about forgoing the proper procedures for entry into the country, which she hadn't had time for, considering the urgency of the situation.

How truly humble of her after all the amazing feats she's accomplished here.

"We'll say that you responded to our call for aid," I'd insisted, and her frown had turned into a wry smile.

An after-the-fact explanation here and a technicality there—the truth would be what we wanted it to be, as long as we stuck to it. Besides, her entry hadn't been illegal; she'd entered with a group of merchants headed by the Nevelian trader Julius zu Eigel. The only thing that she'd missed was informing the authorities that she was a princess. She'd done nothing untoward.

She still hadn't been eager to go along with our plan, but I'd eventually managed to convince her to join us, and we'd all set off for the capital. Yesterday, we'd finally arrived.

I woke up in the morning after a good, long sleep, but I still felt weary from the journey—too weary to be able to put up with my brother's excessive energy levels.

“Another bright and sunny day outside. Today’s going to be great, I just know it!”

“How are you so annoyingly excited at this time of the morning?” I muttered harshly, not deigning to conceal my bottomless irritability.

That didn’t seem to bother my brother though. He put on a bright, joyous smile. “I’m happy because you’re home,” he said softly.

My hostility faded away. “Oh...”

Most days I want to thump him to shut him up, but whenever he had something important he wanted to say, he’d weigh each word.

That’s one part of him that I really don’t think is fair.

“Also,” he said, “I get to see the princess today, don’t I?”

“You...do. *Please* try not to embarrass yourself.” I put particular emphasis on the word “please.” I *was* fond of my brother, but I wouldn’t say that I trusted him.

Okay, if he says a single word out of place to our savior, I’ll give him my strongest punch and get him out of the room. I glared at him.

Licht’s eyes widened. “It’s not like you to look so desperate.”

“Our kingdom owes the princess a great debt, and more than that, she’s important to me personally.”

Licht blushed and leaned toward me. “Wait, you’re in love with her?”

“Don’t be stupid.” I shot him a cold glare. *First my father, and now my brother... Why do they all have to bring romance into it?*

“Oh, you aren’t? Then how do you feel about her?”

That question put me in a bind. The best descriptions of how I felt toward her were respect and admiration, but those didn’t capture everything. When I’d seen that small, young girl braving danger without flinching, it had made me feel restless, made me want to reexamine how I lived my own life.

I’d fallen silent and begun to think, but Licht grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Come ooon, tell me, Nacht! I need to know!”

Get lost! I went to pry his hands off of me, but I stopped myself because I'd remembered something. "Say, Licht, why don't we play a game?"

"What kind of game?" Licht asked, cocking his head and looking utterly puzzled. "Also, why?"

After thinking for a little, I replied, "There's something I want, so we'll play for that. You can pick the game. I don't mind what we play, as long as it's something I'll win."

Licht's eyes grew round after he'd heard my unhesitant declaration. His long eyelashes fluttered up and down as he blinked. "So, er, there's something you want really badly, and so you want to win?"

"Yes."

"We don't need to play for it. If there's something I can give you, I'll give you anything."

"There's meaning in winning a prize fairly. Think of it as proof of my resolve." *Although, some poor kind of resolve it must be, given that I've stacked the odds in my favor.*

It was the kind of proposal that an ordinary person would shout down for being ridiculous, but my brother accepted. "Got it." Then, with the most earnest look on his face, he said the stupidest thing. "How about we play rock-paper-scissors until you win?"

"Sounds good," I replied. I was quite the idiot too. "Let's get started."

I clenched my fist and held it up, and, facing me, my brother did the same.

"Rock, paper—"

"...acht... Nacht."

A soft voice was calling to me, and someone was gently shaking me.

"Hmm?"

I'd been recalling what had happened that morning, but Johan's call snapped my mind back to the real world. I glanced over to the spot next to me where he

was standing and saw that he didn't look happy.

What in the world has gone wrong while I was daydreaming? I shot Johan a questioning look, and he replied by gesturing with his eyes. I followed his gaze and found my brother, standing as still as a statue in front of Princess Rosemary.

"Um...?" Princess Rosemary was looking up with confusion at my brother, who was gawking at her without saying a word.

The sound of her voice snapped Licht out of it, and he heaved a long sigh. "Forgive me... You're just so pretty that I can't take my eyes off you."

Well, that didn't take long, I muttered in my mind and clenched my fists. I was ready to give him a pummeling at a moment's notice.

Princess Rosemary smiled awkwardly at my brother's flirtatious greeting.

I wanted to cradle my head. It was clear to see that she wasn't comfortable, but Licht still didn't notice.

I wish he were a bit better at picking up on hints. And I wish he could tell that Princess Julia is watching all of this and her smile isn't genuine. The only thing I'm okay with him not noticing is the vein bulging on Johan's forehead.

The atmosphere in the room was horribly tense, but my carefree older brother was having a jolly old time by himself, chattering away.

I knew that I shouldn't have let him meet Princess Rosemary. Although I couldn't have avoided it forever, what with the banquet for their welcoming reception coming up in a few days.

I'd set up this impromptu, low-attendance tea party to get them to meet each other beforehand so that Licht wouldn't make a scene at the banquet... But looking at Princess Rosemary, who was smiling but still looked tired, I realized that my choice had been mistaken. *I'm terribly sorry.*

"Prince Licht," Princess Julia butted in, probably tired of waiting for Licht to stop speaking. "It's not fair for you to keep this adorable guest all to yourself. Would you introduce her to me?"

Princess Julia had walked to Licht's side, and she now turned her eyes to

Princess Rosemary and smiled.

Princess Rosemary blushed slightly.

“I’ve never seen something so pleasing to the eyes...” my brother whispered while staring at the two princesses introducing themselves to each other.

It irked me to agree with something an old man would say, but he was right: One had eyes like black quartz and long, black hair as soft as silk thread, and was beautiful in a restrained way. The other had sapphire eyes and wavy platinum-blond hair that seemed to be spun from pure sunlight, and she was beautiful in an ostentatious way.

The dresses they wore heightened the contrast.

Princess Julia’s featured patterns of flowers and vines embroidered on black fabric in dark-green thread. The lace adorning her sleeves, the ribbon on her bodice, and her choker were all a matching black, and the entire outfit presented a modest impression.

In contrast, Princess Rosemary was wearing a dress with a color scheme based on ivory. The hems and the embroidery on her billowing sleeves were a modest, matte gold. The frills on the front of her dress and the slightly see-through lace on her cuffs glittered faintly... Perhaps tiny strands of pearl-gray thread had been woven in.

One was light, the other darkness. One the sun, one the moon. White and black.

They were visual opposites, but when they stood side by side, they complemented each other. It was like they were dolls that’d been crafted as a pair.

“I’ve been dying to get to know the hero that saved Vint.” Princess Julia softly took Princess Rosemary’s hand. Princess Julia was the shorter of the two, so she had to look up to make eye contact with Princess Rosemary, who recoiled slightly.

“Oh, please, I’m no hero. I would’ve been helpless to do anything if it hadn’t been for the help of those around me.”

“Don’t say that. Only you could’ve inspired the people around you to take action. You even won the support of a tribe of doctors that have never pledged their loyalty to anyone else before. I’d love to have the chance to meet them.”

“Unfortunately, they aren’t here.” This response came not from Princess Rosemary, but from Johan. He pulled Princess Rosemary toward himself as a way of subtly distancing her from Princess Julia. Once Princess Rosemary was behind him, he turned to face Princess Julia.

“Oh, you won’t let me see them?” Princess Julia asked with a cute tilt of her head.

“They’re not for show,” Johan said, narrowing his eyes with displeasure. “Besides, they won’t follow anyone’s orders except my sister’s.” There was a smile in form only on his lips, but that only emphasized the coldness in his eyes.

There are subtler ways to throw down the gauntlet, Johan.

Johan probably never had any intention of letting Princess Julia and the doctors meet.

Although he wasn’t lying—they really hadn’t come to the palace. We’d parted with the Khuer when we’d left Grenze. Most of them had returned home to their village, but five of them had volunteered to remain in the town. Apparently, the disease had only subsided temporarily, and there was a high chance of another outbreak. The exact method of transmission wasn’t known, but the doctors suspected that insects served as the disease’s vector. In other words, the decline of the disease wasn’t due solely to the effects of the medicine and other countermeasures; the season changing from summer to fall also played a big part. Further outbreaks were to be expected during the seasons when insects became more active.

And so, five of the doctors had proposed to monitor the situation for several years until things settled down, and I had given my approval immediately. I ought to have been the one begging them instead.

As such, five of them had ended up remaining in Grenze, but as doctors serving the Kingdom of Nevel.

One of them, an elderly gentleman, had said, “We will give our assistance to

the Kingdom of Vint in any way we can, but please don't forget that Princess Rosemary is our one and only master."

The people that'd returned to the Khuer village had all made their minds up about her as well. Princess Rosemary had been in tears when we'd parted with them, but one of them had roared with laughter and said, "It's not like we'll never see each other again." He'd then continued, "Whatever direction the talks go, we *will* come back to you, so carve out a home for us."

There was no longer anything that could sway the Khuers' hearts away from her. Kings and nobles with an understanding of their worth could bring piles of gold and the most generous of contracts, but it wouldn't matter one bit.

"No...?" Princess Julia paused for a moment in thought and then nodded. "I suppose not. That's a shame." Then, for some reason, she looked away from Johan and toward my brother and said under her breath, "I'll have to give up."

Perhaps I was reading into it too much, but it seemed like she wasn't just talking about meeting the doctors.

No, it wasn't just my imagination. She was clever, so she must've understood. Princess Rosemary was now a figure to whom Vint owed much. The bond between Nevel and Vint would only grow firmer from now on. Even if she could wrap my brother around her finger, she'd find it difficult to damage relations between the two kingdoms.

Moreover, my brother loved women, but he wasn't the type to lose himself to them. He'd whisper the most passionate profession of love into their ears one moment, and the next moment, he'd put his family—me and my father—first. Even if she were to become his wife, she'd find it impossible to make him dance to her tune.

And most importantly... I thought, but then I felt someone looking at me and I raised my head. I found a pair of piercing, black-quartz eyes staring right through me. Her pupils were as black as a bottomless abyss, and she was looking at me as though she were weighing me up. Suddenly, Princess Julia broke her gaze away from me and smiled at Princess Rosemary. "Well, I was most interested in meeting Princess Rosemary, so I'm happy. I now have something to tell my family on my return to my country."

“Huh, are you going back to Lapter, Princess Julia?” asked Licht.

“I am,” Princess Julia replied apologetically. “I haven’t told you, but my great-aunt is unwell, so I intend to go home. I do hope I’ll see all of you again some day.”

She looked at each person in turn, first my brother, then Johan, Princess Rosemary, and finally she stared directly at me.

Not put off, I twisted my lips into a smile. “I hope so too.”

In my mind, I continued, *Although, when that happens, we might both have new roles and objectives.*

Because, as of this morning, I’ve decided what I want.

After looking between my brother’s flat palm and my two outstretched fingers, I said, “I win.”

“Yep, you win,” my brother agreed, not seeming upset by his loss. “So what do you want?”

I looked him in his eyes, which were glowing with excitement for some reason, and then I took a deep breath. Even after making it this far, I was getting nervous.

To say the words on the tip of my tongue, I would need courage. *No more backing down. No more giving up. Enough saying “too much work” and running away from it.*

I’ve made my decision to change.

“The throne.”

After a second, Licht’s eyes flew as wide open as they could go, and I watched his reaction before continuing.

“Let me be the first in line to inherit the kingdom.”

I want to be king.

So that I can keep my beloved people safe with these two hands.

So that, this time, I can be the one to protect my friends, the friends that saved my people.

I will be king.

The Second Prince Says Farewell

What I wouldn't give for a storm to come right now...

I haven't made such a dumb wish since my early childhood. What did I use to do...? I'd have a go at a rain dance in the hopes that it would give me an excuse to climb into my sister's bed at night. The moral of the story is that, at three years old, I was just as innocent and cute as a kid that age should be...and just as hopelessly stupid as well.

It's disappointing to realize that the quality of my ideas hasn't improved over the years.

My sister tilted her head and looked at me. "Is something wrong, Johan?" she asked, sounding confused.

I glanced back down.

"Staring up at the sky and sighing..." she continued. "Is there something playing on your mind?"

"No," I replied, smiling at her. "I was just thinking about how nice the weather is." In my mind, I added, *"Too nice for my liking."*

"You're right," she said, looking up to the sky. "I'm glad the sun's come out. I wouldn't want to leave on a day when the weather's depressing and rainy."

The mere sound of the word "leave" made me want to furrow my brows.

At present, we were standing in front of the gate to Vint's royal palace. Over my sister's shoulders, I could see the carriage that would take her away ready and waiting. This was the day that my dear sister would return to the Kingdom of Nevel...and it was still too early for me to go back there.

In other words, after today, I wouldn't be able to see her for some time.

"You look like your life's about to end, Johan," whispered Nacht. He was standing next to me, having come to see my sister off.

"Of course I do," I murmured in reply. "Being separated from my sister is a

matter of life and death to me.”

Nacht rolled his eyes. “You survived these last four years. You can put up with a little more.”

A few months apart certainly did seem trivial to endure compared to four years. But I’d finally remembered how lovely it felt to be with her, so even that small amount of time seemed like it would be unbearable.

I took her hand and, with a serious look on my face, said, “Take care, sister. I pray that you have a safe journey.”

She looked troubled by that. “You’re worrying too much. I’m only going to Nevel.”

“I’m *not* worrying too much!” I proclaimed, puffing out my cheeks like a child.

I heard Nacht mutter, “Well *that’s* a disturbing sight,” but I chose to ignore him.

My sister let out a cute chuckle and then lowered her eyes. “We’re going to be separated for a while again.”

I wanted to believe that the lonely tone in her soft voice wasn’t just my desires manifesting themselves as an auditory hallucination.

Lifting her hand up in mine, I locked my fingers with hers. Then, I leaned down and whispered into her ear. “I should be coming home to Nevel in a little under six months.”

“Huh?” My sister’s head whipped up. Her blue eyes had grown round, and I could see the exuberant grin on my face reflected in them.

“So...I want you to be there to welcome me back.”

After a second, my sister smiled prettily. “Of course!”

Oh, she’s so cute and lovable.

My hands tensed up, ready to follow the whims of my full heart and wrap themselves around her...but somebody else must’ve seen through my wicked feelings, because I felt a light thump on the back of my head.

“Get your sanity back, Johan.”

I rubbed my head and glared coldly at my assailant. "I've never been more sane."

"That makes it worse," Nacht replied, letting out a long sigh. "I'm starting to think I should confine you to Vint for the rest of your life, for your sister's well-being."

"Ha ha, that's a funny joke, Nacht."

"I'm afraid I do not jest. You should make a home here. I'll introduce you to some cute girls our age."

"That's not funny, Nacht," I said. "Besides, are you actually suggesting that there are girls cuter than my sister? Impossible."

"I'm seriously starting to worry about your future, my friend."

We exchanged a conversation in grumbles and whispers, our foreheads pressed together, occasionally butting each other with our elbows as our argument continued.

Seeing that, my sister's eyes crinkled and she smiled. "You get along so well."

Nacht and I looked at each other with expressions of revulsion. We certainly weren't on *bad* terms...but having that pointed out at this moment made me feel like we were being compared, being called birds of a feather, and I wasn't sure I liked that. Nacht seemed even less happy about it, but I chose to ignore him.

"Johan has always been shy, so I'm relieved to know he's got a good friend," she said. She looked like any big sister talking about her awkward little brother.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, sounding childish because I felt uncomfortable. "And how long ago was that?"

But my sister didn't seem to mind. She waved her hand near her waist and said, "When you were *thiiiis* big."

That was back when I'd used to hide behind her skirt and glare at everyone who passed. There was nothing that I could say to argue now that she'd brought up my bratty younger years, so I just groaned quietly and fell silent.

"Oh, really?" said Nacht, a grin stretching across his face. Clearly, he was

finding this amusing. “Who would’ve thought? Even Johan was a cute kid once.”

I plastered on a false smile and replied, “Oh yes. I was like an angel sent from the heavens.”

Nacht’s expression stiffened. “*You’re no fun,*” his face seemed to say, but I could live with that. I wasn’t about to give him anything that he could use to poke fun at me.

“Nacht used to be shy too,” said Prince Licht, popping out from behind his brother.

“*Ugh,*” Nacht groaned, clearly annoyed by Prince Licht’s timely and unexpected arrival.

“When he was little, he was frail and quiet, and he’d always hide behind me. He was so adorable... And still is, obviously.”

“Licht, you have two choices—you can either shut up right now of your own volition, or you can let me shut you up forcefully.”

A vein was bulging on Nacht’s forehead, but Prince Licht didn’t seem to notice. He continued talking about Nacht’s younger days, smiling away.

I can only anticipate this ending forcefully, I thought. *Prince Licht’s about to be knocked out.*

“You two get along so well too.”

My sister’s adoring observation provoked two opposite reactions from the brothers: Nacht grew pale, while Prince Licht smiled and nodded.

“Though, I wish I could’ve had more time to get to know *you*...” Prince Licht said. “It’s such a shame that we have to part.” He walked over to my sister and presented her with a bouquet of flowers, which he held in both hands.

The arrangement had been designed with a light theme in mind, and the flowers ranged from white to pale blue in color. Indeed, the bouquet looked both classy and beautiful.

He’d also given flowers to Princess Julia on the occasion of her departure a week ago—those had been more vibrant. Prince Licht must’ve judged that the understated color scheme of this bouquet suited my sister best. I hated to

admit it, but the arrangement was a perfect match for her.

“They’re so pretty...”

Oh, sister...when your eyes shine like that, you’re far prettier than any flower could be.

“Nowhere near as pretty as you,” said Prince Licht.

Great, my brain works on the same level as Prince Licht’s. Somebody kill me.

Actually, kill him instead. In fact, just die. Don’t touch my sister. Don’t look at her. Get away from her.

“Thank you very much. Look at the lovely flowers he’s given me, Johan.”

Immediately, I stopped glaring at Prince Licht and switched to a smile. “Yes, very nice.” Prince Licht got on my nerves, but that wasn’t the flowers’ fault.

“We have a wonderful greenhouse in the palace now, Johan. Most of the plants inside are medicinal herbs, but there are lovely flowers too. I’ll show you when you come home.”

“Okay.”

“Me t—” Prince Licht had begun to invite himself along, but Nacht covered his mouth with a hand.

Nicely done, my friend.

“I think I’ll go on a leisurely tour of the palace when I’m home,” I said.

“I can’t wait.” My sister smiled happily, and I gave her one in return.

I’ll do anything to protect that smile, I vowed.

The Reincarnated Princess Returns Home

I could faintly feel light shining through my eyelids, and this slowly tugged my mind toward consciousness. I could tell that it was morning, but my sleepy body refused to wake up.

Rolling over, I turned my face away from the source of the light. The feeling of the bedsheets against my cheek was comforting. I groped around for my pillow and brought it close to myself—it smelled lovely, like soap and sunshine.

Oooh, this feels great... How long has it been since I last slept so comfortably?

Relief and relaxation spread throughout my body thanks to the lovely scents and sensations, which were just as I remembered them. I was about to relinquish my grip on consciousness, putting up no resistance to the pull of sleep, when...

Pat.

A split second before I could fall asleep, something soft pressed against my forehead.

“Hmm...?”

It felt elastic and a bit moist, and when it rubbed against me, it didn’t hurt at all—for me, this was a very familiar sensation.

When I peeked my eyelids open, I heard a cute meow. A pitch-black ball of fur with eyes as blue as gems filled my entire vision. Even half-asleep, I could never fail to recognize him—this was the face of my adorable cherished pet cat.

“Neroooo... Morning.”

Nero was treading on my face and staring into my eyes. I reached my hands out to pull him into a hug, and he put up no resistance, letting himself be wrapped up in my arms. Although, when I rubbed our cheeks together, he let out a grumpy meow and tried to push me away with his cute paws.

Yep, this is what I’ve missed... The attitude! The cuteness that the whole world

envies! It's my Nero! My adorable Nero...

I sat upright, still holding him.

The morning sun shone through the window, illuminating a spacious, Renaissance-style bedroom. It was a view that I'd seen many times.

"Oh, that's right, I'm home..."

I had received an invitation to the Kingdom of Vint's palace, attended a reception there, and then returned to Nevel. Yesterday, the grand adventure that had taken me out of my sheltered life had come to an end.

And last night, I'd slept better than I had in a long time, either because I was in my own cozy bed or because of the sense of ease that home brings. My body still ached, but I felt amazingly good, like nothing could stop me.

I lounged around on the bed for a while, and then my maids entered the room. They *were* smiling, but was I just imagining the intense looks on their faces? No... Nero jumped up and fled, so it wasn't just my imagination.

Out of consideration for my exhaustion, they'd let me off easy last night, only giving me the bare minimum of beauty care. I wouldn't be so lucky today. They went at my skin, my hair, and my nails with such thorough attention that I just wanted to cry "*No more!*" When they finished, I was practically sparkling.

The disheveled state that I'd ended up in after my travels had clearly been too much for them to bear. *Well, professionals always take pride in their work... Sorry for looking like such a mess.*

Thanks to my early morning intensive care regimen, I was already feeling ready to drop. I'd obviously been wrong to think that nothing could stop me—plenty still could. Wearily, I got myself ready to leave and then headed for my brother's office. I'd received a message from him telling me to visit once I woke up.

When I arrived at his office, the soldier stationed outside entered the room to announce my presence. Also, the knight guarding me today wasn't Klaus—he would be taking a little more time off since his wounds hadn't fully healed yet.

Immediately after the soldier entered the room, I heard a loud crash. I

jumped, wondering what could possibly have happened, but before long, the door flung open. Then someone frantically flew out and looked at me.

Because he'd come running, his straight platinum-blond hair had fallen out of place and was stuck to his forehead. His ice-blue eyes, which usually gleamed with sagacity, were jittery with unease.

Despite feeling overwhelmed by his intensity, I cautiously called his name. "Chris...?"

When I did, the sculpturesque, attractive features on his face contorted, as though he were fighting pain. Chris opened his mouth to say something, but he eventually closed it again without uttering a word. Then, he took my hand and tugged. "Come in," he whispered curtly, inviting me inside.

As soon as I was in the room, my eyes met Sir Leonhart's. He'd returned to Nevel before me, so this was our first meeting in over ten days. Before I had a chance to speak with him, Sir Leonhart walked past me out of the room. For some reason, he was wearing a knowing expression.

Only Chris and I remained in his office. After leading me over to his work desk, which was neat and organized, Chris turned around to me. Now that we were facing each other from such a short distance, I noticed that the gap in our heights had increased. I knew that I'd grown taller over the last six months, but Chris was outpacing me.

And his height wasn't the only thing that had changed—Chris's face had always been slender, but his cheeks looked slightly more sunken than I remembered.

"Have you lost a bit of weight, Chris?" I asked out of concern, but he didn't answer.

Without saying anything, he held his large hands out wide and embraced me. He wrapped me up in his arms, though not tight enough to hurt. If anything, it felt comforting. It told me that I was home at last, that nothing would scare or hurt me anymore, and my entire body relaxed.

"Rose." He called my name tenderly.

I slid my arms around his back and rested my forehead against his chest,

which was muscly despite his slender figure, and I could hear his heart beating its gentle rhythm. "I'm back, Chris."

"Welcome home, my precious Rose." Chris stroked my hair. His touch was so very gentle and I felt like I was a little child again. "How was your first ever journey?"

"Oh, it was tough! I didn't think that I'd make such a mess of things. You'd laugh if you saw how little I could do by myself... I almost lost heart so many times."

"Uh-huh."

"But I met some nice people who helped me out, so I managed to make it through."

"That's good."

"Yes," I said, grinning from ear to ear and looking up at him. "There are so many things I want to tell you about."

He smiled back, and I saw a look of delight in his narrowed eyes, which were the color of the winter sky. "That's perfect, because I want to hear them all."

Oh, Chris, you're acting like a doting grandfather...

I was happy about that, but it was embarrassing as well. I bashfully pulled myself free from his hug. "Okay then. I'll come back when you have a day off from work."

As soon as the words left my tongue, a look of despair crossed Chris's face. "You won't tell me now?"

"No," I said, tapping him gently on the chest. "Make sure you get all your work done."

Chris lifted his arms in surrender.

While we were gazing at each other, one step farther away than we'd been, the door opened with impeccable timing. Sir Leonhart had returned, and he smiled when he saw us. "I've come to tell you that it's time."

"Very well. I've just been turned down by my sister anyway."

Sir Leonhart glanced between the two of us and then let out a hearty laugh. “I’d expect nothing less from the princess.”

Though I wasn’t sure whether I could categorize that as a compliment, I decided to interpret it in a positive light.

Saying farewell to Chris and Sir Leonhart, I set off, although my destination wasn’t my bedroom.

I passed through a familiar area, where evenly spaced, gorgeous pillars rose from the ground. Cast-metal lighting fixtures hung from the arched ceiling, which was decorated with stuccos. This was the corridor that connected the palace to the greenhouse—I’d walked through this space countless times before, but it felt like I hadn’t seen it in so long.

Only half a year had passed, but that was still a long time to be away. I slowly progressed down the corridor and was struck with strange waves of strong emotions. It took me twice as long as normal to arrive at the greenhouse.

I ordered my guard to remain by the entrance. Klaus would’ve refused my order immediately—at least in his early days—but this knight was actually a normal person, so he obeyed without question.

The door to the greenhouse creaked open as I pushed. The scent of plants flowed across the threshold. I held up my hand to shield my eyes from the dazzling light that shone through the glass ceiling. After a few steps, the branches of a tall tree provided some shade.

Somebody was watering plants farther inside, but upon hearing my footsteps, he pulled the watering can back. The silk-thread strands of his silver hair bounced as he swung his head around. His indigo-blue eyes found me, and he blinked several times like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Huh?” he blurted, sounding dazed. The tin watering can slipped through his limp fingers and clattered to the floor. The water inside sprayed everywhere, splashing the tips of his boots. But that didn’t seem to bother him...or rather, it seemed like it was the last thing on his mind. He gawked at me with wide-open eyes.

“Hey, Lutz! Your boots are getting wet.” His partner ran over and pulled him—

Lutz—away from the puddle on the floor. Led by the hand, Lutz stumbled a few steps back, but since he was so distracted, he nearly tripped over his own feet.

“What’s got you spaced—” Lutz’s partner, Teo, started to speak, but when he followed Lutz’s gaze, he stopped. His ruby-red eyes found me and grew wide.

“Prin...cess?” he mumbled quietly.



The three of us fell into a strange silence after that. A baby bird chirped in the distance, and the sound echoed throughout the greenhouse.

Though this situation had happened before, now our roles were reversed—that time, I'd been in the greenhouse, and the two of them had come running to me.

I'll bet I looked just as surprised as they do now. I wonder if they felt the same nervous tingling that I have right now. And I wonder if they felt just as relieved as I do.

My inner feelings showed softly on my face. "I'm back," I said with a broad smile, and immediately, both of their faces scrunched up. Then, they both began to charge toward me at the exact same time.

"Wai—" I retreated a step back as they bounded forward at an incredible speed. If the two muscular boys had pounced on me, I had zero confidence that I could catch them. But it was physically impossible for me to move myself out of their path; they were closing in too fast. So I gave up on trying to dodge, and instead, slammed my eyes shut, bracing for impact.

However, that never happened. I timidly peeked one eye open. "What are you doing?" I had to ask.

The two of them had come to a stop about two meters away from me, and both were still holding their arms out wide. After my question, they let their arms drop to their sides, and then they exchanged glances with each other.

"Well... You know?"

"Yeah, um... Right?"

What the hell is going on? I cocked my head, confused about what they meant.

"Like...you're more princessy, Princess," Lutz mumbled, turning his slightly blushing face away.

More princessy? So I seem more like a real princess?

Just a second, what the hell did they think I was before?! An impostor?!

“I feel obliged to inform you that I have technically always been a princess.” Due to my surprise, I inadvertently took on a more formal tone.

There’s no technically about it! I’ve been an honest-to-god princess since the day I was born... Well, kinda. Okay, sure, I don’t speak or act like it most of the time, but still! My heart’s as delicate as any teenage girl’s! Technically!!!

Lutz threw his head left and right in a panic. “No! Th-That’s not what I mean!”

I guess he wasn’t actually accusing me of being an impostor.

But it seemed that he was having trouble finding the right words, and he groaned while messing up his hair.

Teo smirked while watching him. “We were just surprised,” he explained. “You’ve always been cute, but you’ve become so pretty.”

“Huh?!”

He said the words confidently, without a hint of bashfulness, and it floored me. I was so surprised that it took a moment before I could respond.

Look at you, Teo! Not many teenage boys could tell a girl to her face that she’s pretty without going red.

“Ummm... Thanks?”

My eventual response was decidedly boring. The intonation of my voice rose at the end like a question, and I failed to blush even a little bit. As a girl who’d been paid a compliment, my reaction was the exact opposite of what it should’ve been.

Unsurprisingly, Teo put on a troubled smile. “That sure missed the mark... I thought you’d act at least a little bashful.”

I quickly countered with panicked excuses. “Well, you took me by surprise! You managed to call me pretty without missing a beat. I bet you’re popular.”

But the look on Teo’s face didn’t change. It was a strange expression—half-troubled and half-flabbergasted. “Coming from the person who didn’t even blush...”

“I told you already, I was just too surprised to be able to react. I’m not saying

it's your fault. I mean, you're kind, handsome, and on top of that, you know how to pay compliments... You'll win all the girls' hearts."

Probably feeling left out, Lutz sulkily forced his way into our conversation. "You know, I don't think I look awful either."

Oh, what did the ten-out-of-ten stunner just say? He doesn't look awful? He's picking a fight with someone there... I just have to figure out who.

"I'd say you're more pretty than handsome," I told him.

"Wow, thanks... That's not really what I want to hear. I'd rather be called handsome too." Despite my compliment, Lutz looked insulted.

Teo placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Either way, the princess still won't have eyes for us."

"Then what sort of man *is* your type, Princess?"

"Me? Uh, if I had to say, I prefer manly men..." I said with a look of confusion. "Wait, how did we get onto this topic?"

I'd answered the question instinctively, but when I thought about it, I began to wonder how I'd found myself discussing this with Lutz and Teo.

Why is it that the first conversation we get to have after half a year apart is about my romantic preferences? I mean, I'm happy to talk about love and everything, but we've got plenty more things to catch up on.

"You're right," Teo agreed. "It's like, why have we cut the emotional reunion short to talk about this?"

"No, it matters," Lutz argued, shaking his head. But then, he awkwardly mumbled, "Although, I guess we should've given the princess a little more time to settle in at home before chasing her for the answer."

"Argh, we've made a mess of this!" Teo put his hands behind his head and grinned.

Is it just me, or does he actually look a bit happy about that? I hope it's not just me... It'd be much too lonely to know that I'm the only one finding comfort in this silly conversation and relaxed atmosphere.

Teo caught me looking at him, and he narrowed his eyes gently. “Let’s start over. Welcome home, Princess.”

“Hey, no fair!” Lutz shoved his way past Teo. “Welcome home, Princess!”

I was so happy at having returned to this lively, loving place I called home that a smile rose to my face once more. “Thank you both. I’m back.”

The First Prince's Relief

My eyes were locked in a thoughtless stare on the door that my sister had left through...at least, until the sound of Leonhart clearing his throat brought my mind back to the real world.

"Prince Christoph, you're not getting any work done."

I refixed my grip on my fountain pen, feeling embarrassed by Leonhart's chiding. For the crime of depriving me of time with my sister, I had half a mind to crinkle up the accursed papers and fling them out the window...but that wouldn't do.

I stifled a yawn as my eyes scanned across the meticulous report in front of me.

"Hmm?" While I was wiping a tear from the corner of my eye, I sensed someone looking at me. I glanced over to Leonhart, who was watching me with his eyes as round as saucers, as though he'd seen something remarkable.

"What?"

"It's nothing."

I knew that he wasn't likely to say it out loud for reasons of etiquette, so I did it for him. "Is it so rare for me to yawn?"

Leonhart smiled wryly. "It is," he confirmed. "To be perfectly honest, I've never seen it before."

I'd expected him to fib a little, so I found myself returning his wry smile. "I expect not. After all, I rarely ever yawn in front of company."

In fact, I could have probably replaced "rarely ever" with "never." This was because my personality dictated that I be ever attentive. In addition, I could function well with the bare minimum of sleep. But even the bare minimum had its limits.

My shoulders slumped. "I haven't been sleeping well lately, so let it pass just

this once.”

Leonhart fell silent, and the expression on his face was indescribable. This was probably because he’d promptly figured out what had been disturbing my rest—the person who’d left the room moments ago, my little sister.

At first, I had suffered from somewhat restless sleep due to worrying about Rose traveling abroad. But after I’d read about her encounter with the pirates, sleep had become a total stranger to me.

Before that report, I’d been able to put my mind at ease by remembering that she was being guarded and that violent incidents were rare. But then...Rose had actually faced a threat to her life. The thought that she might perish somewhere too far away for me to help had terrified me to my core. I hadn’t known what to do with myself, and sitting still had made me feel like I was losing my mind.

During the day, I could cope by distracting myself with copious amounts of work—but not at night. My mind would always wander down the darkest of paths, and the bits of sleep I managed to snatch had been plagued by nightmares.

I never knew I was such a weak person, I thought. Now that I’ve found something that matters to me, I’ve suffered such a fall from grace.

However, I didn’t have the slightest desire to return to the days when I’d had no vulnerabilities—I’d learned that those with nothing to lose are the loneliest of all.

“Starting tonight, I’ll be sleeping well,” I asserted. After a small yawn, I picked up the documents once more.

I spotted a spelling error as I scanned the words, so I handed the paper to Leonhart, who took it, nodded, and stated, “I’ll send it to be rewritten at once.”

After taking a good look at his face, something struck me. *I seem to remember that, before he left for Vint, he looked just as fatigued as I do now.*

“The bags under your eyes appear to have gone away,” I said, glaring at him. Leonhart broke eye contact.

He’d been just as concerned about Rose’s safety as I had. But the reason for

his improved countenance was obvious; a few months ago, he'd traveled to Vint and confirmed with his own eyes that she was all right. After that, he had no more to worry about, so naturally, there'd been nothing to trouble his sleep. What was more, my dear brother Johan was in that country as well.

It's not fair that he's gotten to visit Rose and Johan both... I feel cheated... I've had to go four whole years without seeing my brother.

In my head, I knew that I shouldn't blame Leonhart—I was the heir to the throne, and for that reason, I couldn't go to Vint myself... It wasn't Leonhart's fault.

But it still didn't sit right with me.

"I envy you, Leonhart."

"Your Highness..."

"Who would want to be a prince?" I complained.

Leonhart smiled awkwardly.

He was a subordinate of mine, and he'd done nothing wrong, so I felt guilty for making him uncomfortable. But in my heart, I apologized and prayed to be forgiven, just for today.

The Reincarnated Princess's Self-Examination

A week had passed since I'd finally returned to Nevel. I'd had plenty of fun already—taking it easy with Nero, getting to see Chris, Teo, Lutz, and Miss Irene.

But fortune is a fickle thing, and in life, happiness will always be interrupted before long.

I was scheduled to have a one-on-one meeting with my father...and that day had come.

I didn't want to go. I *really* didn't.

Who would unnecessarily sign themselves up for ridicule and mockery? I'd only recently built my confidence back up, and I wasn't looking forward to having it slashed down again. But there was no possibility of worming my way out of it. Or rather, I had something that I needed to bring up with him for my own reasons, so like it or not, I had to go.

I inhaled and exhaled three deep breaths, then slapped my cheeks and pumped myself up. "You can do this."

I headed for my father's room.

Thinking about it, I've gotten good at putting up with his ridicule and mockery. The key is to ignore everything he says. I'll be fine. I've got this. My time with Nero, Chris, and everyone else has rejuvenated me and gotten me into top form. I feel like I can take on anything right now. Bring it on!

Oh, how optimistic I was...

I stared silently at my hands, which were crossed above my lap. I knew that a pair of eyes was fixed on me, but I couldn't bring myself to raise my head. I stole a quick glance at the armchair opposite me. The man sitting there—my father—was resting his chin on his hand and staring at me. His face was expressionless, but his eyes told the whole story—he was exasperated with me. That was as clear as day.

It was currently minute five of the one-man staring contest.

No more! I wanna go back to my room!

“Quite the spectacle you put on.” Those words broke the long silence, and his voice carried even more exasperation than his gaze.

I summoned my courage and raised my head to meet his gaze...which was pointed elsewhere. *All that for nothing!*

My father was poring over the documents in his hands. Beneath his straight, platinum-blond hair, his long eyebrows cast shadows over his pale-blue eyes. The sight of his dainty fingers flicking through the pages was visually gorgeous, I hated to admit, but he was handling the documents without care. I worried about how much of this rough treatment the paper could take before ripping.

“One minute you’re under attack by pirates, and the next, you’re being abducted by a man you trusted. Then you play doctor at some village deep in a mountain range. You settle into the role so well that I assumed you were planning to live out the rest of your days there as a hermit, but as soon as news of a disease outbreak arrives, you convince the doctors to climb down the mountain with you. Using your ties to the Eigels, you gain entry to Vint, journey to the village in the center of the outbreak, and successfully get it under control.”

One by one, he listed every single thing I’d done during my travels.

It’s ridiculous... Now that I’m hearing it laid out like that, my journey really does sound ridiculous. Every step was packed with drama... Or, I guess I packed it with drama myself by jumping from one bad situation to the next.

My father heaved an exaggerated sigh and flicked the corner of the paper with his fingertip. “This doesn’t read like a report of a princess’s activities. I had to check whether I hadn’t been given the late-night ravings of a drunken poet by mistake.”

I hadn’t expected my deeds to be put in the same category as a poem written by a drunk during a midnight jam session, but I had no counterargument. If someone had put a similar report in front of me, I would’ve definitely sent it back with the comment “No real princess would do that!”

I groaned.

My father looked at me and tilted his head, causing his silk-thread, platinum hair to bounce. “The question I have for you is this: where in the world did you want to go and what in the world were you hoping to achieve?”

Wow, what an asshole! He knows I don't want to say, he already knows the answer, and he goes ahead and asks anyway. Seriously, he couldn't be more of a prick. I wanna see the parents who raised him to be so nasty. Oh, actually, I think their portraits are hanging in the hallway. I'll go and give them a good look later.

I let my mind run down that meaningless rabbit hole to escape having to think about the bind I was in, but it didn't help. Knowing my father, the silence would continue until I confessed, and I was too cowardly to drag it on any longer.

I gave him the answer he wanted. “I was going to Flanmer to find some medicine.”

“For such a simple objective, it turned into a rather dramatic adventure, don't you think?”

“Well... It was out of my hands.”

Surely, I could've come up with a better excuse than that, I thought. Even a three-year-old could think up something better.

Unfortunately, my brain was doing a poor job.

And of course, that answer wasn't enough to satisfy my father. He knitted his pretty eyebrows together. “Out of your hands? The situations that you *voluntarily* put yourself in were *out of your hands*? Don't make me laugh.”

At least fake a laugh if you're gonna say that! Don't say it with a straight face!!!

“What reason did you have to run toward our neighbor in their time of crisis? Why would you act like their savior? And what was so important that it was worth risking your very life over?”

I said nothing.

“Was it because you've changed your mind about not wanting to marry into

Vint's royal family?"

I dispelled this unexpected accusation at once. "Absolutely not!"

"Then what is it?" he pressed. "Your conscience couldn't live with doing nothing?"

Unable to answer, I stared at my feet. I didn't think that anything I'd done had been wrong. But I did understand that I'd been reckless. There were things that I should've entrusted to others instead of doing myself.

After I fell silent, I felt my father's eyes upon me once more. He let out another sigh. "You have exceeded what a little girl ought to be able to do. In any other circumstances, I should be praising your virtuosity." His voice still sounded somewhat exasperated, but it was definitely a little softer than before. "However, it was simply good luck that you managed to return here safely. A single mistake would've cost you your life. The kingdom will fall if I can do nothing to stop my foolish daughter, who, like a wild boar, plunges headlong into danger with no guarantee of results."

My eyes grew round and I blinked over and over. Seeing that, my father shook his head from side to side, clearly frustrated.

I knew that I was lucky to have made it back unharmed, and I did understand that I'd been skirting death. But I hadn't put *Nevel* in any danger.

I'm too unimportant to have any impact on whether Nevel will fall... Oh, maybe he's criticizing me for how I got into Vint, which was potentially illegal? I guess it could've caused tensions between our countries.

"The reason is not what you think it is," he stated.

"I haven't said anything yet."

"It is written on your face, and it is incorrect."

"I haven't said anything yet!" I shot back aggressively. *Don't mark my answer as incorrect before I've had a chance to say it! At least let me respond first!*

But his next words blindsided me. "You underestimate your importance."

"Huh...?"

“Don’t forget—your death would render certain individuals useless.”

Someone who would become useless if I died...?

The first image that entered my mind was a face with gentle, ice-blue eyes—the person who mattered so much to me, who’d hugged me when I’d come home. “Do you mean Chris...?” I asked, not expecting the answer to be yes.

“There’s more than one, but he’s definitely the prime example,” my father confirmed.

I grew flustered. Of course, I was interested to know who the other people were, but more than that, I couldn’t imagine Chris becoming useless. “I know that I’m very important to Chris, but he doesn’t mix up his private and public lives.”

There was no doubt that Chris loved me. He’d be upset if anything happened to me, and he might even shed a tear, but he had the strength to overcome grief and lead the country all the same. I had faith in him about that.

“You’re right,” my father agreed, but that made me even more confused as to what he was trying to say.

“Then what do you mean?” I tried to ask, but my father cut me off.

“If you died, he wouldn’t change on the surface,” he explained. “He would emotionlessly fulfill his official obligations without shedding a tear in public. He’d go back to being the lifeless doll that he was before you and your younger brother were born.”

My eyes shot wide open, and my father stared right at me.

“The man who could’ve become a wise king would instead become a mindless puppet. Don’t let that happen to him.”

“I won’t.” The words spilled through my lips before I’d even realized I was speaking, and my head was shaking from side to side before my brain had even registered what I’d been told. “I’m sorry.”

My father didn’t reply to my apology. However, in his eyes, which were usually ice-cold and devoid of all warmth, I caught a glimpse of a kind look.

The Reincarnated Princess Negotiates

The corners of my eyes burned.

I never knew my father actually worried about me and Chris. I'd written him off as someone only interested in politics, someone who sees us only as tools to be manipulated or as useless things.

And to think, I was so sure he'd just ridicule me, set me up with another impossible mission, then say goodbye. Maybe he isn't as heartless as I make him out to be...

With that thought, I lowered my head and wiped a tear from my eye.

But a split second later, he said, "Right then," and his dispassionate tone of voice changed the mood in the room.

Uuuh...? Suddenly apprehensive, I nervously raised my head. Our gazes met. His eyes were cold now, and the gentleness from a moment ago was gone. My father was back to his usual self, and his attitude earlier seemed like nothing more than a hallucination or my imagination.

"Now that we've dealt with the least important matter—"

The least important?! Oh, so getting along with me isn't important to you then?!

My eyes sucked my welling tears back in. They were bone-dry now, so much that I worried I'd contracted dry eye syndrome, and my gaze was wide open as I gawked at my father...not that it bothered him.

"—let us get to the main point. Don't waste my time with the unimportant."

He'd brought importance up again, as though to drive the dagger in, and a vein began to bulge on my forehead. My fists were quaking above my lap.

Oh, yep. Of course. That's my father, everyone! I wasn't wrong about him after all. The joke's on me for letting myself hope, for even a second, that we might get to have a normal parent-child relationship.

“Well then, I’ll tell you!” I growled through gritted teeth, fueled by anger.

“Go on,” he said.

His voice and his gaze were both quiet now, which sapped my momentum. I sat up straight after noticing the clear change in the mood. My father had resumed putting on the airs of a statesman, and my posture had to match that.

It’s really not fair of him to act like this.

After taking a deep breath, I cleared my throat, then looked my father straight in the eyes and began to speak. “Do you recall our agreement? I was supposed to deliver an accomplishment before Vint’s crown prince, Licht von Ersta, came of age.”

My father raised one eyebrow as if in mockery of the question. Of course he remembered. “I do.”

“Does my subdual of the disease outbreak in Vint qualify as an accomplishment?”

My father’s brow furrowed deeply, and his piercing stare bored a hole in mine. He sighed. “I doubt your appalling negotiation skills will ever improve,” he muttered with a good degree of disappointment. “Never give the other person the right to set the value of your offerings. You lose your bargaining position.”

I was struck dumb, realizing that I’d played my best cards early. But I’d just wanted to have those facts set in stone.

“I suppose I could recognize it as an accomplishment. You did well...for a little girl.”

At least he’d called what I’d done an accomplishment. I let out a sigh of relief.

But when I did, my father’s glare grew more pointed. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

What is? I cocked my head, not understanding.

He looked at me with incomprehension.

What’s he disapproving about now? I don’t understand. Is it because I relaxed as soon as I got him to recognize my accomplishment?

“How do you not see that you’ve lost? That you’ve given away your bargaining position already? Instead, you should have insisted that your deeds are more impressive than I implied.”

I had no comeback to that. The enshrinement of modesty instilled in me through my Japanese upbringing had worked against me...

But I’d had no other choice—the credit for stopping the disease from spreading didn’t belong to *just* me. I’d gotten assistance from plenty of people, and they had been vital to my success. Obviously, I’d needed the Khuer tribe, but then there was George and Michael...Klaus, Big Sis Bianca, and the sailors too. And we wouldn’t have made it to the village in time if it hadn’t been for Johan, Prince Nacht, and Sir Leonhart. My stomach was already churning at the idea of playing it all up as *my* accomplishment, and I couldn’t dress it up any better than that. I was a coward.

I had hoped to improve a little with age, but in less than a year I would turn fifteen and become an adult...and I still hadn’t changed one bit. *My father is probably right—my appalling negotiation skills will never improve*, I complained mentally while gently rubbing my stomach.

“From the viewpoint of strengthening our ties with the Kingdom of Vint, your accomplishment has been significant—I can think of nothing that could be better. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say I owed you a favor. However, your negotiating ineptitude has sealed your fate—your prize as no more than the right to refuse a marriage with Vint’s crown prince. Satisfied?”

What?! From the sounds of it, I could’ve held out for more!!! So basically, I could’ve negotiated three rolls of bread out of him, but I’ve ended up with a single roll dropped into my hands. God, that’s so annoying!

Before, I would’ve been more than content with just the nullification of my prospective engagement. But that was no longer the case—I wanted more. I wanted that extra roll of bread.

I stopped biting down on my lip and voiced my dissatisfaction. “I’m not.”

My father’s eyes widened slightly with curiosity.

“I have another request.”

“Another one?” he said. He seemed to be asking, *“So you don’t mind the engagement remaining in place?”*

I did mind. I minded a lot. But...

“There’s still about half a year until Vint’s crown prince comes of age,” I said. “I’ll accomplish something else before then... So first, I want you to grant my other request.”

“How bold of you to promise another accomplishment.”

He’s got that right... But there’s another big task that I have to do anyway, and putting myself under the pressure of a time limit will give me further incentive to get it done quickly.

“Interesting,” my father mused, his eyes narrowing with enjoyment, reflecting the tone of his voice. “Your request is...?”

“I want you to create a facility within Nevel...one where doctors and herbalists can gather.”

I’d promised the people of the Khuer tribe that I’d create a space within Nevel for them to belong. I was a princess (on paper anyway), and I could probably afford to employ them at my personal expense. But that wouldn’t do—it wasn’t as much as they deserved.

So what I needed was instead a hospital, one which commoners and nobles alike could visit. Ideally, I wanted a university hospital to facilitate medicinal research and foster the development of new doctors.

As I explained my proposal in detail, my father’s brows furrowed even more. Perhaps my explanation was incomprehensible due to my severely lacking vocabulary, or maybe he just thought it was a stupid idea from a stupid girl.

Probably both. Definitely both.

“You’re making this almost infeasible idea sound so much easier than it actually is.”

I was aware that it would be a huge challenge to enact my idea, and he’d rightly pointed that out. In this world, doctors and herbalists were both generally solo practitioners. The concept of a hospital, where practitioners

gathered together in a single place to treat patients, simply didn't exist. In other words, even if I'd just asked to establish a standard hospital, it would be a brand-new endeavor. But on top of that, I wanted its doors open to the common folk, and to establish provisions for research and training. It was honestly an extreme proposal.

But it was the least I could do. If I did anything less, I'd be doing a disservice to the doctors who'd pledged to me the culmination of centuries of knowledge and techniques.

I felt my eyes threatening to drop to the floor, but I fixed them on my father and tensed my stomach muscles. "It may be preposterous, but a request's a request, right?" I fought off a grimace and smiled sweetly at my father.

He stared at me, saying nothing. In his eyes, I saw more than just exasperation... Or at least, that's what I wanted to believe.

The room fell silent. The amount of time that passed was probably no more than thirty seconds, but it felt like hours to me. My facial muscles were beginning to spasm, and cold sweat was trickling down my spine, but I managed to keep my smile in place.

Eventually, my father snorted. "Very well."

Really?!

Although it had been my own proposal, I'd definitely thought he'd turn it down. Obviously, I wouldn't have given up after a refusal or two—I had wholeheartedly planned to fight for it—but still...

"The plan itself does have merits."

You think so?! Yesss!!! I wanted to jump up and down with joy, but since I was with my father, I settled for a few mental fist pumps. Though I was clenching my tingling fists tightly to control myself, I couldn't keep the grin off my face.

"However, it won't be in full working order for quite some time—five years at best, even after expediting the project. And it will take decades before every component runs smoothly."

"I know," I replied, nodding. "I believe that the cause is worthy enough to

invest a hundred years in its completion.”

My father’s eyes widened slightly. After staring intently at my face, he squinted at me. “You truly are a strange girl.”

At that, my eyes grew large as well. I didn’t feel particularly angry though—I was getting used to having insults thrown into my face.

“I anticipated that you’d bristle after I told you it would take five years, let alone decades...but then you start talking about a century in the future. You’re always so full of the naive idealism of little children, but every now and then, you possess the far-sighted view of an old man. I’m also baffled that you can declare that this institution has value...despite there being no existing precedent nor even a clearly defined blueprint. Your haphazard explanation confounds me as well. You clearly don’t understand any of the finer details of the parts, but you speak like you have a perfect understanding of the whole. It’s almost as though you’ve seen the finished institution with your own eyes.”

I’ve put my foot in my mouth...

The cogs in my head were whirring faster than they ever had before, but they ground to a pitiful halt, and my deficient brain failed to produce a single excuse.

What should I say? How do I get out of this? I knew he wouldn’t believe me if I spilled all the beans, and I didn’t want to tell him anyway; there were too many risks involved, and besides, I just didn’t like the idea. I still had no clue what went through my father’s mind, and to be honest, I found him difficult to talk to.

But now wasn’t the time to be complaining. *What will I do if I wind up in a situation where I have to fess up?*

However, ignorant of my internal distress, my father didn’t ask me to explain. “Well, an absence of consistency is nothing new for you.”

He stood up from his armchair, and his attitude seemed to suggest that the conversation was over.

I freaked out. My expression riddled with confusion, I looked up at him. He glanced toward me and gestured with his eyes for me to follow.

Not knowing what else to do, I stood up, but then I noticed that my father was heading toward the small room adjoining this one—where the records of the demon lord were maintained.

Is he leading me to another room for a prolonged interrogation? I thought, and so I came to a stop. However, standing still wouldn't get me anywhere. Running wouldn't solve anything either... I'd just be signing myself up for a stricter interrogation on a later date.

My father turned around and stared at me while I stood there. He'd unlocked the door, his hand was perched on the knob, and there was a clear message in his eyes: *do you honestly think you can get away?*

A screen from a retro game flashed in my mind. *Rosemary runs away. But the space was blocked!*

Oh, that's right, you can basically never run from boss fights. With that offhand thought in mind, I put on a resigned grin and began walking once again.

Upon entering this small library for the first time in quite a while, I saw that, among the plain-as-ever furnishings, there was one spot that was slightly different. A pile of books was stacked up on the desk, and one of them had been left open. I knew that my father wasn't exactly a neat freak, but he wouldn't usually be this slovenly. He must've been in here reading right up until the moment I turned up.

He flopped onto the couch and pointed to the spot next to him.

I obediently sat down there and then caught a glimpse of the page that the book on the desk had been opened to. The page had more than just letters written on it—there were also drawn diagrams that looked like magic circles.

"Is that a magic circle to seal away the demon lord?" I asked, my eyes stuck on the book.

My father shook his head. "No. It has another use. It is still in the trial stage though."

Another use? Before I could ask my question, my father closed the book with his hand.

“More importantly, let’s get to the main topic.”

It’s here! The main topic!!!

My shoulders flinched and I sat up straight. Unable to flee or shut my eyes, I simply watched my father with a sense of despair, waiting for him to speak.

“About the demon lord... The records say that he is sealed away in a stone.”

Hmm...? The main topic that my father brought up wasn’t what I’d expected.

“The seal hasn’t been broken at present, but nobody knows how long it will last. Eventually, either by design or accident, the seal will be broken.”

I had no idea where the conversation was going, but I nodded.

It would be dangerous to assume that no incidents today implied no incidents tomorrow. No creation of humanity could ever be called eternal or perfect.

“However, the previous king and the one before him both persistently ignored the demon lord’s existence. They’d probably been afraid of making matters worse by poking around. Let sleeping dogs lie, after all. Unfortunately, we can no longer afford to be so relaxed about it.”

The conversation had taken an ominous turn.

“What...do you mean by that?” I asked.

“A spy from Lapter has been wandering around the border with our kingdom,” my father replied.

“From Lapter?”

In the game, Lapter—a kingdom situated to Nevel’s north—was an enemy nation. We weren’t exactly on great terms at the moment either, but we weren’t publicly at odds with each other.

“They appear to be searching for something.”

If I had to guess what that something was, given the present circumstances, there was only one answer I could come to—the demon lord.

“Why?” It was the obvious question.

“No idea,” my father said without interest. He heaved a sigh. “Perhaps they’re

foolish enough to believe they can control him, or maybe they have another use for the stone. I can't imagine the actual reason, but whatever it is, it doesn't matter. What's important is that we find the stone before anyone else does and deal with it appropriately."

"Okay."

I couldn't begin to imagine what Lapter wanted with the stone, but if they did beat the odds and find the demon lord, that could spell disaster for the world.

"However, it is unknown where the demon lord's stone actually is. I have read these books inside out trying to find out, but it is not recorded anywhere."

Perhaps those who'd written the books had feared that preserving a written record of the demon lord's location would invite someone to break the seal. Or perhaps it had been recorded, but the book containing the information hadn't survived over the long years. Whatever the case, we were dead out of luck.

At that point, I felt a pair of eyes on me. I glanced up and to my right, and my eyes met my father's.

Why's he looking at me? I wondered. I've got a bad feeling about this...

"Yes?" I asked.

"Oh, I just remembered that a daughter of mine happens to be snooping around the border...with the help of Leonhart's friends."

Yeah, sure, as if that just occurred to you... Give me a break! You're only bringing this up because you know exactly what I've been up to! Drop the "Oh, I just remembered" act!

"I won't pry into your motives—"

Well, that's good... But don't expect me to thank you for it, because I know there's a "but" coming. What's the price to keep you from prying?

I glared at my father with undisguised suspicion, and he looked back at me with narrowed eyes.

"—but in exchange, I want you to beat them to what they're searching for and bring the stone back here."

There it was. The price my father set turned out to be: the demon lord.

It's just one fool's errand after another with this guy...

The Reincarnated Princess Reconsiders

I was in the break room that adjoined the greenhouse. “Lovely and warm...” I purred as I pressed my face against the desk, which the sun shining through the glass had heated.

Such slovenly behavior was unbefitting of a princess, but I didn’t mind because nobody was around to see; the knight guarding me was waiting on the other side of the tower, and both Lutz and Teo were out. Miss Irene was away as well, and Nero had locked himself inside my room because of how chilly it was outside.

In other words, I was a total loner. But I didn’t feel lonely, promise.

I can’t seem to snatch any time with Lutz and Teo lately. They’re always off doing something. Miss Irene seems busy too... I wonder if something’s going on.

As I contemplated what that something might be, the magic circle that I’d seen in the book in my father’s study gnawed at the back of my mind. There was a vague link between the two—magic—but I wasn’t sure how exactly one would feed into the other.

I don’t even know what that magic circle does, so I’m wasting my time thinking about it.

I sighed.

Turning my mind to something else, I unfurled a roll of paper across the desktop—a map of northern Nevel, which is to say, of the border between Nevel and Lapter. My goal was to search for the demon lord.

That was the impossible mission my father had given me a few days ago. *What a great way to say “welcome home” to the daughter you haven’t seen in months... And that daughter is still just a child, but you hand her this fool’s errand anyway.*

Although I wanted to gripe, refusal wasn’t an option. Besides, I would’ve had to face this sooner or later anyway; we couldn’t just forget about the

demon lord forever and cross our fingers in the hopes that he wouldn't come back. That was the reason I'd got Sir Leonhart to put out feelers in the first place.

Even so, I had been undecided. The stone contained the soul and power of the demon lord—was bringing it back to the palace a good idea? *If it's not causing any harm right now, shouldn't we leave it alone? The seal has stayed strong for hundreds of years... What if moving the stone accidentally disrupts it?*

Basically, my thoughts had been aligned with the previous kings of Nevel. I'd been sitting on the fence, scared to jump down on either side.

"It's so like him to hit me where it hurts. That's where he excels."

It was just like with the epidemic—he'd cut off my escape route with perfect timing.

I'd been left with just two choices: charge on ahead down a perilous course, or stop dead in my tracks. And, thanks to my hatred of losing, I'd had to grit my teeth with anger and tread that perilous course. I did feel like I was doing exactly what he wanted, but at the end of the day, it worked out to my benefit, so I was willing to live with that.

Besides, it wasn't all bad news this time...

"Hoo hoo hoo..." Alone, I let out a creepy chuckle. I couldn't wipe the smirk off my face. Why? Because my traveling partner for this incognito mission would be none other than Sir Leonhart!

I can swallow a hundred bitter pills with that tiny bit of sugar! Go ahead and give me one or two more impossible tasks while you're at it; I'm game... Okay, that's a lie. One ridiculous challenge is enough for me.

While I was taking advantage of the lack of onlookers by sampling every different facial expression I could, there was a gentle knock at the door.

Is that Sir Leonhart?! The face of my beloved entered my mind. He was supposed to be on his way over. I fixed my posture and sat upright on my chair.

I pinched my cheeks to get rid of my smirk and look more serious, then cleared my throat. "Yes?" I somehow managed to feign normality as I spoke.

But the voice that asked for entry belonged to someone else. Though surprised, I granted him entrance.

When the door opened, I saw my personal guard—Klaus, who was supposed to be recovering. It felt like it'd been ages... He'd gone to his family's home to rest and recover, so two or three months had passed since our last meeting.

"Klaus..."

When I stood up to welcome him in, he kneeled before me. His royal guard outfit made the sight of him kneeling stunningly beautiful. His movements were smooth, and his complexion looked great. He was his usual self again... It seemed unbelievable that he'd been recovering from a serious injury until very recently.

"I sincerely apologize for my lengthy absence. I will be returning to work starting tomorrow, and so I have come today to deliver my greetings."

"Is your injury better already?"

Klaus nodded and then explained the state of his health. "Yes. The wound itself has fully healed. I do feel a slight twinge when I swing my arm, but other than that, I'm fine."

"Thank goodness. But don't do anything crazy just because your injury's better."

I let out a sigh of relief, at which Klaus broke into a happy smile.

"Of course, and thank you."

Seeing how happy my kind words made him, I felt somewhat ashamed. *I must really treat him like trash if a conventional "glad you're better" is enough to cheer him up...* I was racked with guilt. *Have I actually been that hard on him? Uhhh, yes. Yes, I have. Sorry.*

While I was busy judging myself, Klaus stood back up, and I saw his eyes flit toward the map on the desk.

Ah, he said he's coming back to work tomorrow... But I'll be gone again, so he'll have no one to guard. He won't be coming with me because it's already been decided that Sir Leonhart will be my traveling companion.

“Klaus, um, the thing is...” Unsure of how to broach this subject, I hemmed and hawed.

Klaus seemed to pick up on what I wanted to say, and he nodded. “I’ve been told already. I know about you leaving for an inspection, and about who will accompany you.”

That caught me off guard, and my eyes grew round.

Seeing my reaction, Klaus put on an awkward expression. “You were worried that I’d bear a grudge against the captain again, weren’t you?”

He was correct, although it wouldn’t be easy to admit—I didn’t want to say yes, and I couldn’t say no because I’d be lying. Instead, I fell silent, but the whole story must’ve been written on my face because Klaus smiled wryly.

“I appreciate your concern. However, there’s no need to fret.”

What does he mean? I cocked my head, struggling to ascertain his meaning.

“When I heard that your traveling companion would be the captain, I was relieved. He will keep you safe, no matter what unexpected mishap occurs.”

My eyes opened to their widest extent. *What?! This isn’t you, Klaus. Have you gone delirious with fever?!*

Klaus’s new outlook flummoxed me. I knew him, and I knew that he’d lunge on Sir Leonhart over every little thing.

You surprised me by acting like a gentleman earlier, and now you’re treating Sir Leonhart with reverence... What the hell’s happened to you?! It’s almost like you’ve turned into a normal knight!

Unable to bear the brunt of my stare, Klaus sullenly lowered his eyebrows. “By the look on your face, it seems that my reaction must be a great surprise to you. Are you doubting whether I’m the real Klaus?”

I nodded honestly. “I hate to be rude, but yes.”

Klaus looked even more sullen now.

I felt terrible about it, but I’d entertained the idea that he might be an impostor with perhaps more seriousness than I should’ve. *I could buy what had*

just happened if I could find a zipper on his back... Okay, sorry, I retract that.

“On our journey together, I discovered how weak I was. I will never be able to forget how my failings exposed you to danger time and again.” Klaus emptied his heart to me, his face a picture of deep regret.

I couldn't hide my shock. *I never knew he saw it like that.* “Klaus...”

“I'm not saying this out of self-loathing; I'm simply stating a fact: I am weak. Particularly so at the moment, as I've only just recovered from my injury. I haven't managed to train much in a while, so I doubt I can move my body like I used to. So although I will be returning to work as a knight, I have decided to relinquish my guard duties for the time being.”

He's like a completely different person... If the Klaus from a year ago had heard him say this, he would've flipped. However, right now, this Klaus was calmly and logically analyzing his own condition.

“While you're gone, I'll devote myself to training so that I can present myself before you stronger than I am now. So please, come back safely.”

Klaus bowed his head, and I just stood there, stunned. *I never thought I'd see the day when Klaus would become such a splendid knight...*

I'd always had faith in his skill as a swordsman, but his personality had always seemed problematic. Not in the sense that he was nasty, but more that he was a per— Excuse me, that he was *eccentric*.

I'll have to change my view on him now. Hereafter, Klaus will be an earnest, diligent knight in my eyes.

“Raise your head, Klaus. Your sincerity is clear to me now.” When Klaus lifted his head and I saw the earnest look in his eyes, my guess was confirmed. Klaus *had* changed. “I appear to have been mistaken about you.”

“Lady Rosemary?”

“I apologize for how rudely I've always treated you. From now on, I'll change that.”

“What?!” For some reason, Klaus seemed mortified.

What's there to be so shocked about? And has he actually gone a bit pale, or

am I just imagining it?

“You do understand that I mean to treat you more politely?” I clarified. Maybe I hadn’t been clear enough and he’d misunderstood.

But Klaus grew paler still. “Um, actually...” he mumbled, and then, barely audibly, he said, “Please don’t.”

Please don’t what? You truly prefer being treated like trash?! So I was right about you all this time?! You like that sort of stuff?!

It was my turn to grow pale.

Noticing that, Klaus blushed and swung his head left and right. “Don’t misunderstand! I don’t mean it like that!”

Then what the hell do you mean?

“I don’t mean it in a weird way! What I mean is...when you act less politely, it makes me happy because it’s proof that you’re comfortable behaving in a more relaxed way around me. And when you glare at me coldly, I know that I’m the only one you wear that expression for, which makes me, ummm...”

Although he looked like a blushing young girl when he spoke, his words instilled nothing but fear in me. Also, I wasn’t sure where exactly the misunderstanding was supposed to be... His explanation seemed to match my understanding more or less exactly.

I took a step away from him, and Klaus grew even more panicked.

“Lady Rosemary!”



“Klaus?”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Could you back off a bit?” I asked. “Specifically, at least three meters.”

Klaus’s wretched scream echoed throughout the break room.

The Personal Guard Trains

A blade sliced through the air and passed within a hair's breadth of my cheek. I bent back to avoid the attack, but then came another, and another. I dodged each one by the skin of my teeth, which put me in an uncomfortable stance, and because of that, my spine began to spasm. When I stumbled, my persistent foe didn't miss his chance—the tip of a blade was thrust in front of my eyes.

"Mercy," I panted breathlessly, my shoulders heaving.

My sparring partner pulled his sword back. "You've lost your touch, Klaus," he said with a big smile. This was Dennis, a man who had entered the royal guard at the same time as I had.

"Don't I know it." My own ineptitude was more aggravating than my loss. "Another round," I said, raising my sword and readying my stance.

Dennis scoffed. "Don't be in such a hurry to return to your sickbed. We're gonna take a little break."

I shook my head. "I can keep going."

Dennis furrowed his brows. With a look of resignation, he raised his sword once more.

Our blades clashed together over and over, and the clanging could be heard throughout the training grounds. A blow fell toward me, but I parried, immediately stepped forward, and plunged my sword toward him.

But it was evaded with ease. Of course it was. As I was now, my movements were too slow. I could mentally picture how I wanted to move, but my body just couldn't keep up. I hated that each motion was a fraction of a second slower than I wanted. After my wound had healed, I'd made sure to maintain a regime of push-ups and sit-ups...but regardless, I felt that my stamina had dropped.

How pathetic. This is all it takes to make me breathless.

And although my injury had healed, some aftereffects remained. I could feel

spasms in my back when I swung my sword, and there was a slight numbness in my arm.

“Gah!” I shielded myself from a swipe of his blade with my gauntlet, deflecting the blow. Yet the force of the impact sent pain coursing through my barely healed wound. I grunted and my movements stopped momentarily.

Dennis thrust his sword beneath my nose once more. “We’re done.”

“One more time,” I panted, taking deep breaths to regain control of my breathing.

He stabbed his sword into the ground and rested his hands on its pommel like it was a cane. “No. We’re taking a break.” He sighed. “If you push yourself too hard and rip your stitches open, then all of this will be meaningless.”

He had a point. There was a stone stairway nearby, and I sat down on one of the steps. Sweat dripped from my forehead, stinging my eyes. I rolled up one of my sleeves and wiped the sweat away, and then I realized that Dennis was staring at me.

“What?”

“You’ve changed,” he remarked. “You actually take people’s advice now...sometimes.”

His use of the word “sometimes” grated my nerves, but I knew he was right, so I couldn’t argue back. I was less stubborn than I had been, but still worse compared to others; proof of that was when I’d refused his advice to take a break a few minutes ago.

“I’ve just become aware of my own weakness,” I replied. “I can’t protect the ones that matter to me with my current fighting style.”

Dennis’s eyes grew round, and then he smirked. “So, it’s Her Highness driving you on then?”

“Of course it is.” *As if there’s any point in asking.*

Dennis rolled his eyes. “It’s always her with you. Well, I suppose it’s a good thing that the mad dog has turned into a loyal pup. She might actually reconsider her attitude toward you now.”

Hearing that, I silently hung my head.

“What do you look so disappointed for?”

“I’m not disappointed...”

“You definitely are. Look at your face!”

I turned my head away. I couldn’t possibly have been disappointed about Lady Rosemary thinking better of me. But it was also true that my heart sank when I remembered her saying that she’d treat me more politely.

Dennis stared at me for a while as I sat there dejectedly, and then he realized something. His head suddenly shot up. “Don’t tell me... You actually enjoy it when she glares at you coldly?! What are you thinking? How could you make someone so noble the subject of your perverse desires?! Don’t come complaining to me when you’re thrown in a cell for *lèse-majesté*...”

“Hey?! I would never—”

Dennis interrupted me. “You’ve gone red, so there’s the truth of it, right there. But don’t worry—at least you’ll be arrested by your friend.”

“*Enough joking,*” I was about to say, but then I saw Dennis brandishing his sword and looking deadly serious.

“Wait! It’s a misunderstanding!!!”

“That’s what every pervert says.”

Who are you calling a pervert?!

“I just...!” I started excitedly, but my energy dwindled. I stared at the ground and mumbled, “I just...want to be...special to her.” I looked toward him out of the corner of my eye and found his baffled gaze focused on me.

“Special?”

I nodded in silence.

“Do you know that you’re not ‘special’ in a positive way?”

Once again, I nodded in silence.

“Her Highness treats even the lowliest commoner with respect,” Dennis

continued, “so you do understand that her acting coldly toward you is in no way, shape, or form a display of affection, right?”

“Give it a break already!” I snapped. “I’ve *told* you that I know that!”

His eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at me. “Then you *are* dragging Her Highness into your messed-up perversions. Okay, jail it is.”

“Why?! Is it so wrong to want to hold a special place in the heart of the person I adore and respect?!”

“It’s all about the way you do it,” Dennis growled. He reached for me with his hand. “Make sure to be a decent person in your next life.”

I have a life right now, and you’ve gone and declared it over. I won’t have this! It’s not fair...

A Certain Spy's Monologue

I was perched on the branch of a large tree, sitting with my arms crossed. Just as I was about to nod off, I heard a screeching shout.

“I’ve had it with you!!!”

I cracked one eye open and peeked through the window of the building below to see what was happening inside.

The room was crowded. Ten or so people had packed themselves inside a space that was only four or five square meters in area. Flanmer’s climate could be warm year-round, but it was winter now and somewhat chilly, particularly here in the high elevation of the mountain range. However, that room was warmed by the heat of intense emotions, if nothing else.

“Why do you have to cling to your stubborn ways instead of admitting that you want the same thing as me?!”

In the center of the room, a young man was dressing down an old one. The young one seemed moments away from leaning over and grabbing the older one, but the older one maintained a calm, dispassionate attitude.

“I’m not being stubborn,” the old man said with a sniff. His arrogant attitude irritated the younger one, who raised his eyebrows.

“You obstinate old man...!”

“That’s no way to talk to your father.”

“If you want respect, you have to earn it!” The young man, Wolf Khuer Lucker, shouted back angrily, incensed by his father’s—the chief’s—words.

I rested my chin on my raised knee and then heaved a sigh as I watched the seemingly endless father-child squabble. “I’ll never get back to Nevel at this rate...”

Three days had already passed since I, a spy for Nevel, had come to this village in Flanmer’s mountains.

This was my second visit, and my purpose was to serve as a relay for communication between the Kingdom of Nevel and the group holding a discussion inside the building—the Khuer tribe. My mission was to ensure the safe transit of the villagers to Nevel’s capital...well, at least, those who wished to serve the first princess. But I just couldn’t hold back my sighs. Not only had the Khuer not started packing, but they hadn’t even wrapped up their discussion.

Although I had to admit, the matter being discussed wasn’t something to be decided lightly—their village could be split in two. At worst, this decision could spell the destruction of the tribe. A stranger who was ignorant of the events that had led to this moment might expect the talks to drag on well beyond just three days, perhaps for as long as a month.

However, I’d been with Nevel’s tomboy princess and had witnessed everything.

I knew that arguments over traditions and squabbles over heritage should be long behind them. The Khuer had accepted change when they’d accepted her. They were free to stay or go, and each individual was to make their own choice.

At least, that was how it should’ve been. The discussions were meant to be no more than a confirmation of that, a rubber stamp of their will. The only choice for each person to make was whether to continue living a peaceful life in this village or travel to Nevel and serve the princess. I had anticipated that arguments might break out among one or two families that had split positions...

But who could’ve seen *this* coming? The choice had split almost *every* household, and the idea of dividing the whole village in two had come up for debate.

“And that goes for the rest of you old folks!” Wolf yelled. “You’re really arguing that ‘this village is where I’ll stay even after I’m dead and buried...’ Are you serious?!”

As Wolf’s shouting suggested, the tribe was split cleanly on age lines: the young wanted to go to Nevel, and the old preferred to stay in the village.

One old man sipped his tea and said softly, “Oh, I am serious. I’m too old to be leaving the village now.”

“He’s right,” agreed another. “We can’t make the trip to a foreign country—we’re too old for that. What’s best for us is to spend the rest of our days here in peace and quiet.”

“My body’s started acting up lately,” said a man of around forty seated diagonally behind Wolf. “I can hardly walk.”

“Funny that,” retorted Wolf. “Remind me again, who did I see zipping around the village gathering ingredients for medicines during that epidemic business not so long ago?”

The man cupped his ear. “What’s that? My hearing’s going too.”

My money’s on him winning, I thought.

“There you have it,” the chief declared. “This is our collective decision.” He spoke like he was putting an unruly child in his place.

Wolf scowled. “You know that I wouldn’t be making a fuss if that was what you *really* wanted.”

“We’re telling you that it is.”

“Yeah, right. You *want* to go, really. You’re just creating problems where none exist, worrying about being a burden on *her*!”

When they heard Wolf’s reasoning, the old men’s eyes widened with shock, and then they laughed out loud.

“Oh, you really think we’re so thoughtful?” asked one.

“You are...” Wolf started, “not! Usually!”

He had probably snapped back the “you are” instinctively, but by the time the words had made it out of his mouth, even he wasn’t convinced. Since that assertion obviously didn’t hold water, he’d needed to change his response midsentence.

Frustrated by this never-ending engagement, I yawned wide. My own opinion was largely the same as Wolf’s. The old men probably thought that they’d be more hindrance than help to the princess. I had no proof to back that up, but I *had* seen their devoted efforts to fight against Vint’s epidemic. I knew that they were born doctors and that they trusted and adored the princess.

So why would they refuse the call to their ideal workplace under a leader they trusted?

They were moaning about the problems of traveling to live abroad at their age, but traveling was exactly what this tribe *did*. Each of them had journeyed across the world, so why was that suddenly a problem now? Perhaps they balked at the idea of leaving behind their ancestral village and its centuries of history, but...I remembered how the chief had looked when he'd vowed to travel any distance if lives could be saved. I doubted that this current sentimentality toward their homeland was the reason for their reluctance.

So, what *was* the reason? I'd come to only one conclusion: they didn't want to be a burden on the princess.

Employing over a hundred people was no easy feat, even for someone of royal standing. In addition, the Khuer were foreigners, so she'd have to overcome the tough hurdle of securing them places to eat, sleep, and live. The job itself presented problems as well; medical work puts a tougher strain on the body than most people would think. The young ones could cope, what with all the stamina of youth, but the older cohort wouldn't find it as easy. They'd probably looked at their bodies, which would grow weaker still year after year, and had figured that they would be of little service to the princess. "*I'd rather wish them happiness from afar than get in the way,*" they'd probably thought.

My musings were cut short by the sound of a door opening and an irritated yell. "I'm sick of this!"

When I looked over, I saw Wolf storming out through the door, running his hands through his hair.

"Crow!" he called after spotting me on my branch. He chucked a bamboo flask at me, then slumped down by the tree trunk and flicked the stopper off his own flask. He chugged the water down and then crudely wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Lowering his eyes, he heaved a long sigh. "I feel awful for how long you've been held up." His voice was gentler than it had been.

"You should," I replied bluntly.

Wolf looked up at me and chuckled, although it sounded like he was laughing at himself. "Sorry. If I could get you home any quicker, I would."

When he said “home,” my mind pictured scenery from the Kingdom of Nevel, and that surprised even me.

Nevel wasn't home in the sense that I'd been born there. In fact, Nevel's king, Randolph von Velfalt, had only recruited me a few years ago.

No, my birthplace wasn't Nevel... It wasn't anywhere as pretty as that.

My thoughts conjured up hazy images, recollections and memories, which took up space now in the back of my mind.

At the end of a narrow, winding alleyway was a space enclosed by crumbling, old stone houses.

Shanties built against the stone walls lined the street. The ground was hardened mud, but it always turned to filthy slosh from the wastewater that was often chucked carelessly from second-floor windows. Flies buzzed year-round, gathering around the food scraps and animal bones strewn across the sides of the street. The wind didn't pass through here, which left the air stagnant and reeking of vomit.

Man or woman, old or young, everyone here was skeletal. They'd walk the streets with their backs hunched and their eyes dark and clouded, and they hardly seemed alive at all, like each passing day sucked away more of their life force...

That was the sort of place it was, this Kingdom of Skelluts—the land ruled by the so-called War-Hungry King.

I entered this world in a slum on the outskirts of the capital.

The country was constantly in some skirmish with a neighbor, and it was by no means a prosperous place.

Some did live lives of luxury—the royal family, the nobility, and those few who found work in the army—but nobody else did. Most of the common folk had seen their homes, their fields, and their able-bodied youths lost to war, and they had no choice but to scrape by in miserable existence.

And my place in life was one rung farther down the ladder than even that—I

was the dreg of the dregs.

I had scrawny arms and legs, scruffy, dull black hair, and skin blackened from dirt. Young me looked a bit like a black rat...and actually, the similarity went beyond just my appearance—my eating habits were ratlike too. With no access to food, I'd dig around for tree roots or half-rotten kitchen scraps, and I wouldn't let a good bug go to waste either. I *was* a rat, just one that stood on two legs and knew how to speak.

My circumstances weren't particularly unique. Skelluts was teeming with war orphans. But, to be specific, I wasn't actually a war orphan. I *was* fatherless, but my mother was still alive.

"Oh," you might say, "*at least you had that going for you.*" But actually, it made things worse.

Life with just me and my mother was nothing short of hell. She was too diseased to move much, and she detested me. Before, she'd been a prostitute, and she'd planned to become the lover of a well-to-do customer after finding herself pregnant with his child—me. However, when it was found out that she'd come down with a disease, she was cast out onto the streets, penniless.

With no friends to aid her and no way back to her brothel, she took her young child to the streets to live there. At first, she'd attracted customers on street corners, but her symptoms got worse and worse until all she could do was lie down.

She had apparently been beautiful once...but my only memories of her were of how she looked at the end, when she covered her head in bandages to hide the flatness of her face where her nose had rotted away. However, I could remember that, even though she'd shrunk up like a skeleton, her eyes had shone so sharply through the gaps of her scruffy black hair.

Spiteful curses directed at me would mix themselves into the howling screams of pain from the disease that ravaged her. "If only you hadn't been born!" she'd shriek.

After I got to one hundred, I stopped counting the number of times I'd heard that.

But I was a child, and I craved affection, so I did everything my mother told me like my life depended on it. I'd comfort myself in my own childlike way, assuring myself that she *must* love me or she wouldn't have taught me how to speak and calculate simple sums.

Looking back though, I understand her selfish motives behind those lessons: she wanted me to attract customers for her because she couldn't herself. And once I'd found a customer, I'd need to know some math and be able to communicate, or else I'd be scammed out of money when it came time for them to pay up.

But little me had no way of knowing that, and I waited on her hand, foot, and finger, clinging earnestly to the fleeting delusion that she'd show me love someday.

And then she died, having never uttered a single nice word to me.

I was all alone and had nothing to live for, but just as death crept toward me, an old lady took me in. She'd lost her partner at a young age, and she offered me food and a place to sleep. The house was warm, the soup hot, and for the first time in my life, someone treated me with kindness. The torrent of my tears refused to stop, and she sat there with me all night, stroking my hair as I wept.

My first taste of compassion moved my heart, but I still didn't know the depths of society's depravity. I did soon though—when I awoke, I found that I'd been bought and sold while I'd slept.

"I just had to take you in," she'd told me. "You're so much like my grandchild." So much for that. *How dare you toy with a pure and innocent child's emotions, you rotten old bitch*, I thought much later. *Hurry up and die*.

My new owners were, as they'd seen it, a band of mercenaries, although they were more like mountain bandits. They'd round up kids like me and teach them how to kill. Skelluts was never at peace, so mercenaries were in high demand.

For better or worse, I was good at killing. I had a talent for it. My aptitude singled me out from the other recruits, and I climbed the ranks of the organization with alacrity, ending up in a specialized assassination unit under the king's personal command.

“What’s your name, rookie?” asked my instructor after I’d joined the unit. He was slender, with feminine facial features and a gentle demeanor, the sort of man that women just loved, and he smiled sweetly at me... But that smile didn’t reach his ice-cold eyes.

“Whatever you want to call me,” I replied without feeling.

“Don’t wanna tell me?” He frowned uncomfortably.

“No. I just don’t have a name.”

Names were too grand for a wretch like me to have. I couldn’t remember my mother ever using one for me, but I’d never felt the need for one either.

The man’s eyes widened slightly as he listened to my explanation. “Oh,” he muttered, and then he paused and thought for a little while. “Okay then...how’d you like Crow? Because of your pretty black hair.”

And so, thanks to something as simple as that, my name became Crow.

“Whatever.”

“That’s settled then. I look forward to working with you, Crow.”

It was just a name to make working together more convenient, and there should’ve been no deeper significance. It shouldn’t have been any different to the “you”s and the “oi, blackhair”s that I’d gotten called up to that point.

And yet, I felt an inexplicable stirring in my heart. I didn’t understand why then, but I do now—for the first time in my life, something belonged to me, and *just* me.

But that didn’t mean I felt a bond with my instructor, and he didn’t associate with me any more than he had to either. To look at him, he seemed like the type to take care of others, but looks can be deceiving—he would only teach me the bare minimum of what I needed to know. He was pretty sloppy too, and prone to half measures.

Because of that, it might be surprising to know that he was one of the very top fighters in the unit. Apparently, he flitted from country to country the whole world over, and I saw little of him after my first week. He had a very different job compared to the ones I was assigned—I was given covert spying

missions within the kingdom, and worst of all, my task was to use seduction as my weapon.

“What’s there to complain about?” he asked on one of the rare occasions I saw him. “I wish I could have fun with pretty women and call it work.”

His comment got on my nerves, and the smile he wore didn’t help. The corner of my lips twitched. “You know what, you can take my job,” I replied. “You’d be great at it with that pretty face of yours.”

“Oh no. If I was half as sexy as you, I might have a shot.”

Apparently, I’d inherited my mother’s fine facial features, and older women all had a soft spot for me. Not that I was happy about it. At that time, I still hadn’t given up on receiving a parent’s love, and it was confusing to be at an age with all that swirling around my head; I was basically a child, and yet my job was to be straddled by women who were the same age as my mother.

I discovered that no matter how elegant the noblewoman or modest the noble girl, they were all the same beneath the bedcovers...just women. That discovery was beginning to taint my view of womankind.

As I was discussing this with my instructor, memories of encounters within bedrooms resurfaced in my mind and I felt ready to throw up. To get rid of the feeling I muttered, “Women are beyond saving.”

“You’re wrong, Crow.” The man shook his head. He looked more serious than I’d ever seen.

His rebuke left me speechless. *He’s not gonna get at me for talking bad about women, is he?* I thought. *He’s no gentleman himself. Sure, he acts like one, but that’s only skin-deep.*

Watching my surprised reaction, he continued with an utterly serious expression. “It’s not just women. We’re all beyond saving, us humans.”

For a second, I thought he was joking. But there was no trace of emotion on his deadpan face and no light in his eyes, so I knew he truly believed what he’d said. *This man might actually have gone through a crueler hell than I did...*

“Besides, your jobs aren’t half as bad as most of the others out there,” he

said, returning to that empty smile of his.

Almost a year would pass before I learned what he meant.

“Today’s job is lookout duty,” he said, leaning against a thick iron door, smiling brightly. “Nice and easy, eh?”

I was standing next to him, but I couldn’t return the smile. I didn’t have the fortitude.

Although we were an assassination unit composed of the finest killers in the land, murder—the trade we were supposed to ply—made up only a small proportion of our missions.

The king preferred glorious battles, so he disdained the use of assassins.

Honestly, I felt like shouting. *What a stupid setup! Why go to the trouble of creating an assassination unit at all? What, is it like all that pretty armor you hang up? You just want something to look at and admire? Killing is basically no more than a hobby to the king.*

But if you think that meant we had nothing to do, you’d be wrong—there was no shortage of shady tasks that couldn’t be completed in the light of day. Take, for example, the abduction and torture of people the king didn’t care for. See, he didn’t like sending assassins to deliver a swift death... But to make a long, drawn-out show of ending their lives? Now *that* he could get behind.

That was the sort of job I was assigned on that day. Beyond the door, I was sure that a spectacle was unfurling, one so gruesome that I’d have to look away.

I grimaced.

The man stared at me. “You know, Crow, I don’t think this line of work is really your cup of tea.”

Saying nothing, I cast my head down. I’d never thought about which jobs I was suited for or where I would excel. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway—none of it was up to me. I’d done anything I could to survive, and I didn’t see that changing. I’d end up doing it all, just to keep breathing.

At the bottom of my gaze were my hands, which seemed to be dyed bloodred. The number of people I’d killed had surpassed double digits long ago.

It was too late to hesitate now... I'd done too much.

But even so, I did hesitate.

Could I really live with myself...torturing people for someone's amusement? I felt like if I stayed on this path, I'd pass the point of no return.

"Find another job."

It took a second before I could reply. "What?" I asked incredulously.

The man stared at me with narrowed eyes. "After I've saved up enough, I'm gonna open a shop," he said, turning away from me to stare at nothingness. "A restaurant, I think. It'll be great."

I felt my chest tightening. I knew he wasn't naive enough to think a servant of Skellut's king could win his freedom so easily. For us, emancipation wore one of only two guises: death or abandonment. We no longer had any say over the course our lives took. But what do men do when they know something's out of their reach? They speak of dreams in the same way that people gaze up at the distant moon in the night sky, too far away to touch.

"For the record, I wouldn't set foot in a restaurant run by a former assassin."

"You sure?" he asked. "I can offer a taste you won't get in a normal restaurant. One that'll knock you off your feet."

"Would. Not. Set. Foot. In. One."

"I'll set up somewhere warm," the man promised, continuing this stupid discussion with a smile. "Flanmer...is a bit *too* hot. Maybe Nevel?" This wasn't his usual empty smile. It seemed genuinely excited and a little sad at the same time. "Yep, Nevel's the one for me. Just think how happy I'd be, living in such a beautiful country."

He was wearing the look of a dreamer. I turned my eyes away from him.

We could never live in Nevel...not us. We'll eke out the rest of our lives in this rotten kingdom. And one day, I'll find myself on the other side of that door, cutting slices off a man-shaped thing, torturing its life away, and I'll hate it at first, but with time, I'll stop feeling anything at all.

A change of fortune was on its way though, and it came with no

announcement. The capricious king meddled with Nevel's sorcerers on a whim, but the botching of their abduction radically altered the international situation. The kingdoms of Nevel and Vint declared war on Skelluts, and three countries neighboring ours announced their support of the allied forces.

Now, he did have the moniker "The War-Hungry King," but even he wasn't so optimistic as to find enjoyment in this predicament.

For the first time since my conscription, I was given a job befitting a unit of assassins. However, the mission was extremely difficult. When they handed it to me, I had to stop myself from asking, "*So...you want me to die?*" It was a massive undertaking. If *he* had been around, instead of on an intelligence-gathering mission abroad, it would've definitely fallen to him and not me.

My task was the assassination of Nevel's king, Randolph von Velfalt.

He'd been right to call Nevel beautiful. Its lands were gorgeous and bountiful.

Even the far-flung towns on the border, miles away from the capital, were clean, tidy, and bustling. Sure, there were still rich and poor here, but the commoners led relatively comfortable lives. At the very least, their lot was far better than that of the commoners in Skelluts. Not once did I see anyone starving to death on the side of the road. Produce grew plentiful in the fields, and carpets of flowers bloomed along the roadsides. People walked through the streets with such carefree attitudes—it seemed like they didn't even have to worry about being trampled by a warhorse.

It felt like their peaceful existence was taunting me.

The capital was particularly resplendent; the great palace towered above the pristine city streets. It was simply marvelous. Unlike the palace in Skelluts, with its gaudy host of ornamentation amounting to nothing more than a sickening eyesore, Nevel's palace was a chalk-painted artistic masterpiece. When the moon lit its walls at night, the sight was breathtakingly beautiful.

But unlike *him*, I didn't crave to live here. It was just too different from the place of my birth. It didn't seem like I was in the same world, even though all that separated us was a border.

Besides, I was going to meet my end here, so the splendid palace wasn't so different from a tomb for me. Though I was confident in my abilities, I wasn't unrealistic—I didn't think for a second that I'd actually be able to assassinate Nevel's king.

And, of course, my attempt did end in failure. Seized by a knight in the royal guard, I stared vacantly into the distance. *Knew it*, I thought. A country as large and prosperous as Nevel was naturally home to exceptional talent as well. By myself, I'd never stood a chance.

I was proud enough knowing that I'd infiltrated the palace and made it all the way to the king's room... Although maybe they had let me in, confident that they could squash a rat like me any time they wanted.

"What nest did you crawl out of, rodent?" A monotone voice rained down upon me. I was being pushed into the floor, my arms held behind my back, so I raised just my head to look up at the voice's owner.

That owner was reclining deeply into an armchair, his absurdly long legs crossed, and his face was so beautiful that I had to doubt whether he was really just a human like me. My body stiffened when I realized that he was staring at me with his emotionless eyes, which poked out from beneath his fine, platinum-blond hair and were utterly devoid of warmth. It took my breath away.

He was a born king, able to awe others into submission with his stare alone, without lifting a finger. This was Randolph von Velfalt, and he calmly looked down on me from above.

Resisting the urge to break eye contact, I kept my mouth firmly shut.



Then, the king tilted his head slightly. His straight, platinum-blond hair bounced gently. “Not going to tell me? Well, no matter. I have a good guess.”

I’ll bet you do, I thought unenthusiastically.

Not many countries would risk picking a fight with the great Kingdom of Nevel, the center of trade, mining, and agriculture.

Lapter might, but that country was as slippery as a snake; they’d wait for the war to start and Nevel’s strength to deteriorate before taking their chance, rather than giving assassination a shot now while Nevel was in top condition.

Maybe some internal actor would send an assassin, but that wasn’t likely—the fall of the king at this internationally tense moment would inevitably invite chaos, and the shock waves would travel far. Only two types of people would attempt such a foolhardy errand: those who stood to gain from that chaos...or absolute idiots.

Suffice to say, there was only one idiot dumb enough to send an assassin after the king of Nevel at this point in time.

Though the cat was out of the bag and Nevel’s king certainly knew that I worked for Skelluts, that didn’t mean I had any intention of confirming the truth. Don’t get me wrong—I wasn’t basing this decision on considerations of duty or loyalty. I was just being stubborn. Even though I’d spent my whole life as a practically worthless commodity, I did have some pride as a person. I didn’t want to fall to my hands and knees, beg for my life to be spared, and still have my throat unceremoniously slit.

I wanted to be in control of how I died.

After staring at me while I maintained my silence, the king’s brows furrowed in an expression of his displeasure. A sigh spilled through his pretty lips. “To squander the talents of a man capable of infiltrating our palace... The rumors of that monarch’s wastefulness were accurate, it would seem.”

For a moment, I failed to comprehend what he’d said. Who would’ve thought that after a lifetime of being treated like dirt by my own country, the man I’d been assigned to kill would tip his hat to me?

I was stunned, and my confusion showed on my face, but the king ignored that and carried on speaking. “His most irredeemable folly was in thinking that a successful assassination would in any way alter his circumstances. He couldn’t be more foolish.”

But I couldn’t stop myself from questioning that; my curiosity toward the man in front of me beat down my determination to keep my mouth shut. “With you dead, chaos would spread throughout the country. There wouldn’t be time for a war.”

I figured that he’d reprimand me for talking out of turn and for speaking rudely, but he didn’t seem at all bothered. The knight pinning me down said nothing either. Perhaps he knew what the king was thinking.

“There would be a modicum of chaos,” he replied, “but it wouldn’t last for long. I haven’t built this kingdom or raised my successor so perilously that it would crumble with the death of a single person.”

The gravity of his declaration, which he’d said so confidently, left me forgetting to even breathe.

His mind was cold and logical. He stood at the head of the kingdom, but he viewed even himself as no more than a pawn on the board. And, he had resolute faith in both his kingdom and his son... None of this was ordinary.

Realizing that I’d been trying to kill a man this exceptional, I finally lost my nerve and began to tremble.

And...I felt jealous. From the bottom of my heart, I envied the people of Nevel who got to serve this king. *A bit late to form regrets*, I thought, almost breaking into a smile. *I’m gonna be dead soon enough*.

But life takes strange turns. The king did not have me executed. Far from it—I ended up finding a job as Nevel’s spy. Magnanimity didn’t begin to describe it.

The risk of taking on a loose cannon that might betray him at any moment should’ve far outweighed the benefits of learning about Skelluts’s top brass. I didn’t draw any attention to the negatives myself though; I wasn’t about to let this lucky break slip through my fingers.

Perhaps I haven’t earned his trust yet, but I will one day, by working diligently,

I thought from the bottom of my heart.

I wanna work for this kingdom.

“But then he almost fobbed me off on his daughter...” I muttered, coming back to the present reality with a vacant look in my eyes.

“Did you say something?” asked Wolf.

I shook my head slightly to say no.

It seemed comical as I remembered it now, but I’d suffered quite the shock at the time.

I knew the king had faith in his son, the first prince, so if I’d been assigned to him, I could’ve accepted it. But a *princess*? What use could a princess—one who’d spent her life secluded away in a palace—possibly have for a spy?

I was overcome with disappointment. Once again, I was being used to curry favor with a woman. If I’d taken the time to think about it properly, I would’ve realized that the pragmatic, genius king would never hand me over for such a stupid reason. He willed it, not because he’d decided I was useless, but because he thought she was useful. But anger clouded my reasoning at the time, and I missed that simple deduction.

However, the princess turned down the offer herself, so I avoided having to work for her. After that though, I developed an interest in her and started paying attention to what she got up to.

And believe me, she got up to a *lot*. *How is a child princess such a treasure trove of knowledge? How is it that she knows everyone?*

I felt more like holding my head in my hands than letting my jaw drop. For better or worse, she was always in the middle of some uproar or another, and she seemed to naturally attract others to herself. That was probably an innate talent of hers. The first prince was lauded as an outstanding, flawless character, but his greatest talent was in his ability to put the work in. Of the two of them, she was better at drawing strangers to her side. There was just this charm

about her... She attracted others who had the desire to help her.

If she'd been born a boy, the country might've split into factions. But I no longer wished that she had been born a prince, and that was because *she* was the one who changed my mind about women being worthless.

Her journey to Flanmer was packed with chaos, and countless times, she found herself in a pinch. Even so, she never asked for help. Despite being so likable, she didn't know how to use people's fondness for her to her advantage. And supposing she failed after attempting to do something by herself, she wouldn't lay the blame at anyone's feet but her own.

The princess was different from the women I'd known in every single way. She did things awkwardly, but that simple way of life seemed so praiseworthy to me. In particular, I'll never forget what I saw in the Khuer village when she was almost enshrined as their goddess.

This little girl, shaking from fear, alone and unassisted, had nevertheless turned down the easy way out. The shock and the excitement I felt then are still clear in my mind, even now. If she'd just passed the buck to the chief and followed the plan he'd drawn up, she could've saved herself from all the hard work to come.

But no. She chose the hard way. She set about convincing the Khuer to join her way of thinking, and she bowed her head to them to preserve their pride.

As twisted as I was, even *I* couldn't look at a person as perfect as her and complain about women. *Okay, I'll acknowledge it—man, woman, it doesn't matter. People deserving of respect do exist.*

I'd met the king and the princess, and those two events were enough to make me feel like my life might be worth living after all.

At the familiar sound of bird wings, I snapped out of my recollections. "Ah?"

After jumping down from the tree branch, I held out my arm, and the bird flying in circles up above swooped down and perched on me. I removed the letter tied to its leg.

The message was from Nevel, and it concerned the princess.

“There she goes again, giving everyone hell by pulling off the unimaginable,” I muttered to myself.

Wolf’s reaction was immediate. “Hmm? You don’t mean Mary, do you?”

Don’t tell the princess that it was the “giving everyone hell” bit that gave her away. Not if you wanna stay in her good books.

I nodded, smirking. “It should help you win over the old men.”

“How’s that?” Wolf asked, looking confused.

“As her reward for stemming Vint’s epidemic,” I began, paraphrasing the message, “the princess has asked His Majesty to create a home for your people... An all-encompassing facility for the treatment of illnesses and injuries, the study and research of medicine, and education in doctoring.”

“What?!” Wolf exclaimed. “I’ve never seen anything like that! Never even *heard* of anything like that!”

“Yep, it’s unprecedented. It’ll take more than just a few years to establish, but when it’s done, it’ll drive the quality of Nevel’s health care right up. And a few decades after that, or just years maybe, young people eager to become doctors will flock to Nevel from the world over.”

She’s always so full of surprises. How does she fit so much knowledge and so many ideas in that tiny head of hers?

“But that... But that...” croaked Wolf, finally managing to speak after shock had turned him mute. His face was turned down, so I couldn’t see his expression, but his shoulders were trembling.

Perhaps such a revolutionary idea was too much to accept for someone like him. Someone from a tribe so entrenched in tradition; someone who was a proud inheritor of many generations of doctorly knowledge.

Or maybe...

Wolf flung his head up, and his cheeks were flushed with excitement. “But that sounds so ridiculously interesting!!! An educational institution as well as a practical one?! That means they’ll teach with lectures *and* on-the-job training!

And if we're researching treatments there, we can change the medicines up while examining how they affect patients, and even try new ones. Wait a second, it sounds like it'll have to be a big facility... Do you think we can get a whole bunch of patients staying there at once...?"

"Most likely."

"This is the best!" Wolf cried. "I love you, Mary!!!"

Wolf's scream drew curious glances from nearby tribespeople. A crowd began to form around him, and I was sure that all of their eyes would gain a childlike sparkle when they heard the princess's plan. After all, the people of the Khuer tribe had an insatiable appetite for the acquisition of medical knowledge.

"I'm going, and I don't care *who* tries to stop me," declared Wolf. "Wait, actually, research and teaching are what the old guys are best at. I'm taking them with me, even if I have to tie ropes around their heads and drag them along."

"Did you hear that? He's plotting to kill us!" The old men had only heard the bit about tying ropes, and they paled.

I watched on as another noisy argument broke out, and suddenly, I laughed out loud. In my heart, I whispered to the princess back in Nevel, *Looks like you're gonna get the whole tribe to come back to you.*

The Reincarnated Princess Travels North

“Hmm?”

Did somebody call my name?

I turned around. My eyes met Sir Leonhart's, and he was tilting his head, looking puzzled. “Is something the matter?” he asked.

“N-N-Nothing at all!” His face was so much closer than I thought it would be... We were almost touching! It surprised me so much that I thought my heart had leaped out of my chest.

Serves me right for letting my guard down. Duh, Rosemary, of course his face is gonna be close... We're riding the same horse!

My pulse had only just begun to settle down for the first time since I'd gotten on this horse, but now it was thumping relentlessly again. I clutched gently at my chest and took several deep, quiet breaths.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I'm fine,” I replied, choosing an answer that was easier to say than the truth. Honestly, I felt like I was boiling.

“The chill will get worse the closer we get to the border,” he reminded me, gazing into my eyes. “Be sure to tell me if you feel cold—I'd rather you not just put on a brave face.”

“I will.” He was so handsome when he made that serious expression, and I felt a new heat flood my cheeks. I pulled the hood of my cloak down over my face to hide my blushing, and the fur lining tickled my face.

This journey is gonna be the death of me, in more ways than one. Don't get me wrong—I'm not complaining. I am happy, it's just...

My heart's resilience was being put to the test by the overabundance of Sir Leonhart. I was actually scared by how happy I felt. When I tapped a finger against my cheek, I could feel the heat. *How am I this toasty when the wind's so*

bitingly cold?

The horse's hooves clip-clopped lightly down the hardened mud path, and I gazed out at the surroundings from my place on the saddle. A light blanket of snow dusted the side of the road, mixed in among leaves. Across the gentle incline of a hill, I could see a wall of towering, craggy mountains with white, snowcapped peaks.

Our journey would take us even farther north, so the cold would get much, much worse, just as Sir Leonhart had pointed out. The two of us were heading for a fortress on the border with Lapter, and we were going to meet the captain of the border defense force, who was an old friend of Sir Leonhart's. Much of Nevel existed in temperate climates, but the northern region could be quite cold; in particular, the land that housed the border defense force's fortress would be buried beneath snow all winter. Though the calendar indicated that spring was on its way, it would be some time yet before the thaw.

I had actually come prepared for the cold: My simple navy blue dress was made of wool, and the fluffy interiors of my boots were woolen and warm. My cloak had a long cape made of thick fabric, with a hood and hem that were lined in fur. Additionally, I was wearing several layers underneath.

It pained me to bundle myself up so much in front of the man I loved—as ever, I was at rock bottom for girlish appeal—but I'd convinced myself that it was for the best; I would've hated to catch a cold and be a bother to Sir Leonhart.

I'd dyed my hair again, this time to black, so that I could pose as a relative of Sir Leonhart's. As someone originally born Japanese, I should've felt at home with this color. However, my reflection in the mirror had looked incredibly jarring. It was strange to see my old hair color without the plain-Jane face from my previous body—it made the beauty of my current face (Rosemary's face) stand out so much more.

Sir Leonhart was also wearing several layers of warm, plain clothes, and he was as handsome as ever. His usual guard uniform always got top marks from me for style, but I wanted to see him in a variety of outfits.

I bet he'd also look great in traditional clothing like the Khuer wear...

After imagining Sir Leonhart in a traditional outfit, Wolf and Lily popped into my mind. The Khuer tribe hadn't turned up by the time I'd left the palace. They would've needed a lot of time to pack their things and travel, so there was nothing that could be done about it, but I wished that I could've been there to welcome them in.

I'd planned to hug Lily and say, "*Welcome home,*" and I'd had my heart set on seeing her blush as she said, "*I'm back.*"

My head sank as I sulked.

"Princess?" Sir Leonhart called with a concerned tone of voice. "Are you sure you're not cold? Or perhaps you're tired?"

"N-No!" I said, shaking my head in a panic. "I'm not cold, and I'm wide-awake!"

But Sir Leonhart didn't look impressed. "We'll take a brief break."

"Really, I'm fine."

"No," he countered, "we're taking a break. Riding on horseback when you're not accustomed to it puts more of a strain on your body than you realize."

I certainly didn't have much experience riding horses, but I was no ordinary princess—I'd voyaged across the seas and then climbed a mountain on foot, so I was confident that I could handle a lot more than the average sheltered noble girl.

However, Sir Leonhart was a man of his word, and he brought the horse to a stop in a nearby clear space. He unrolled a blanket atop a boulder that could function as a satisfactory seat and placed me down there. He continued to pamper me after tying the horse to a tree, laying another blanket over my lap and wiping my hands.

I felt conflicted. After accepting the drink he offered me, I said, "Sir Leon?"

"Yes?" he replied. I noticed that he'd casually positioned himself so that his body would shelter me from the wind.

Hmmm, I am glad, but... "I think you're fussing over me a bit too much."

Sir Leonhart's eyes widened with surprise. He looked up and to one side, then

scratched his chin with a finger, like he was trying to remember something from the past.

Maybe he didn't realize he was being so overattentive?

"Am I?" he asked, his voice lacking confidence.

I gave a big nod of my head.

Sir Leonhart was here to guard me, not to serve as my butler. I felt guilty letting him look after me so much, and it made me feel awkward. While I was technically a princess, I *did* know how to look after myself. Plus, this polite treatment reminded me of the time when he'd only seen me as a princess. After all the progress we'd made in our relationship, I didn't want to start back at the beginning.

Obviously, I couldn't tell him *all* of that, but I told him bits and pieces of it, and when I did, he frowned.

"Is it annoying you?"

"No, it's not that! I just...feel guilt—"

"Then please, don't fret over it."

It was hard to argue back after being told that. *I wonder if Sir Leonhart just likes being the responsible one? He did tell me that he has a lot of younger siblings, and in Hidden World, he was always so helpful. Maybe the right choice is to think of this pampering as a treat and let him carry on. But it's making me feel really nervous... Will I ever get used to it?*

But then, with no regard for the mental turmoil I was going through, Sir Leonhart said something outrageous without batting an eyelid. "It seems that I enjoy taking care of you."

I almost spat out the water I was drinking, and I was disappointed that nobody was here to compliment me for managing to hold it in.

"*What does that mean?!*" I wanted to shoot back, but seeing the bright, innocent smile on his face more or less sufficed for an answer.

He probably just finds looking after children fun. He's not giving me any special treatment, and he's not flirting either.

But this was a conflicting situation for a girl in love, so I ought to be forgiven for showing him a resentful glare.

The stone fortress stood tall and imposing against the backdrop of the chilly winter sky.

Unlike the peaceful capital, the fortress was unnerving, making me feel tense. Perhaps it was because the structure lacked any decoration in its architecture, or maybe it was the blanket of snow covering the area. When knights came out to welcome us, their practiced, precise movements and the austere looks on their faces exacerbated the effect.

I'd better not get in their way while we're here... I decided, freezing up from nerves. But then we were led into a room, and the moment we entered, the mood lightened. I couldn't conceal my surprise.

"Long time no see, lover boy!"

The stern expression I'd seen on the other knights was absent from their captain's face, and instead, he wore a cheerful smile. He patted Sir Leonhart's shoulders with tremendous force.

"Don't forget that we are in the presence of Her Highness," Sir Leonhart warned, frowning.

"Sorry," said the captain, although his demeanor remained unchanged.

"I've heard all about Her Highness's magnanimity. She's not one to complain to a rural guy like me about being rough around the edges." Then, he turned to me and winked. "Is she?"

I felt more like grinning than getting angry. He seemed lively, and I would've bet that he could make friends anywhere.

"It doesn't bother me," I answered with a smile.

"See?" he said, peering at Sir Leonhart with a face full of childish innocence.

The captain had short, blond hair, distinctly creased eyelids, and hazel eyes. Above his high-bridged nose, his imposing eyebrows demonstrated his force of will. With his deep-set facial features, his tan skin, and his cheery demeanor, he

reminded me of South Americans from Earth. He was rather large of stature and seemed very muscular, even with Sir Leonhart there to compare against. His muscles bulged through his tight uniform, which was smaller than what the royal guards wore.

This was Ernst von Lieber, the captain of the defense force based on the Lapter border and Sir Leonhart's old friend.



Apparently, the two of them had met when they were squires. The outgoing Captain Lieber and the service-minded Sir Leonhart had made a good pair, and they had spent all their time together.

I knew that, in their sword fighting practice, Captain Lieber had been the only one who could fight Sir Leonhart on equal footing. Sir Leonhart had been quicker and more technically brilliant, but Captain Lieber had the upper hand in terms of raw power.

I'd heard that their graduating class had been full of the best of the best. That was perhaps thanks to the old friends here who'd encouraged everyone to attain their potential, or maybe because strong recruits had been drawn to knighthood by these two.

Those were the findings of my snooping.

Incidentally, the source for the above info was the knight who'd served as my replacement guard for Klaus. He was obsessed with Sir Leonhart and much more clued in than I was. *I liked that guy. I should become friends with him.*

Captain Lieber slapped his hand against Sir Leonhart's back a couple of times. "I see you're still making the rest of us look bad with your handsomeness."

Sir Leonhart rolled his eyes and replied, "You're one to talk."

The slight frigidity in his response was, in fact, proof of the strong bond they shared.

"But somehow, you're still a bachelor. What's going on? The longer you're available, the more ladies there'll be out there suffering sleepless nights."

I froze solid.

Uuuh, there's a prime example right here!!!

Sir Leonhart grimaced and shot back, "Mind your own business."

Yeah, tell him! Mind your own business! I inserted my own mental commentary over the pair's lighthearted conversation. *Captain Lieber, how are you gonna make it up to me if you convince Sir Leonhart to find someone right now to settle down with?!*

“Oh, give it a rest,” said the captain. “There’s no greater happiness than hearing the woman you love welcome you home after a day’s work.”

At that, I was reminded about a detail I’d heard—Captain Lieber was a doting husband. His wife was frail, so when his assignment to the border defense force in the north had come through, he’d made the difficult decision to leave his wife in the capital and head to his post alone. But apparently, she’d said, “I don’t ever want to be apart from you,” and had tagged along. So basically, they were a madly-in-love couple.

So jealous right now...

“Come on, Your Highness, you tell him—order him to start a family. Any kid of his, boy or girl, would be a boon to our kingdom.”

“Uuuh?!” Finding myself suddenly expected to say something, I panicked. *Well, this is depressing. Why do I have to tell my crush to marry some other woman?! Sir Leonhart’s children? I’d be more than happy to...cough, cough, excuse me.*

Okay, I know I’m not always so princessy, but that was a bit inappropriate...not just as royalty, but as a girl. Sorry. But I don’t want to order him and that’s that.

Besides, I know I’m not directly in charge of him, but wouldn’t me saying something like that still count as sexual harassment? Or abuse of power? Or something, anyway...

Thoughts of all kinds were swirling around my mind, but none of them turned into words to say. I was trying to grasp for an inoffensive answer that could see me through this situation, but then my vision was blocked. Sir Leonhart was now standing in front of me.

“Ernst,” Sir Leonhart growled while shielding me. “I promise there will be consequences if you continue to speak so disrespectfully to Her Highness.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, he sounded angry. Sir Leonhart’s face wasn’t in my view, but when I peeked out from behind him, I could see that the captain seemed quite shocked. His hazel eyes were opened so wide that I feared they might drop out.

But then Captain Lieber clapped his hands. “Oh, I get it,” he said loudly, laughing. “Ah, so that’s how it is? What an ass I’ve been!”

“What are you talking about?” Sir Leonhart asked with unveiled suspicion.

I’d like to know too. Just what part of the previous conversation prompted this reaction?

“Oh, it’s nothing. They’re always telling me that I’m insensitive and don’t pick up on things, and they’re right about that.” Captain Lieber knelt down before me, took my hand, and begged my forgiveness with an expression of pure delight. “Please, Your Highness, forgive my discourtesy.”

I was so confused, and my pupils shrank to the size of pinheads, but I managed to make myself nod. “That’s all fine.” I wasn’t sure whether my reply made sense because I had no idea what he was apologizing for, but that didn’t seem to bother Captain Lieber.

“Thank you. You are as kind as they say.” After that, Captain Lieber turned to Sir Leonhart for confirmation. “Isn’t she?”

Sir Leonhart frowned and glared at his friend. “Even so, that doesn’t give you the right to do whatever you want.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

After a short while, Sir Leonhart sighed. “I won’t let you off next time.”

Captain Lieber nodded, and then the fearsome look faded from Sir Leonhart’s face, and he appeared as calm as ever once more.

Finally, I could let out a sigh of relief. I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding my breath.

After that, our conversation turned to discussing information about the village we were seeking.

Captain Lieber sprawled a map across the desk and began his explanation, his face a picture of concentration. I never did find out what he’d apologized for.

I decided to put aside my interest in his reasoning and focus instead on the task before me, and so I looked down at the paper beneath his hands. His masculine, bulky fingers pinned down the corners of the map, which showed

the northern region of Nevel. In addition to some notes scrawled in distinctive handwriting that slanted upward, there were three places circled on the map.

“Three villages meet the criteria you’ve given me.”

I felt a little relieved hearing that.

I’d worried that my criteria—a village near the border with a dilapidated shrine on its outskirts—might be too vague and leave us with a massive number of hits to work through. It would’ve been awful if dozens of villages had met those parameters, so I was relieved that my fears hadn’t come to pass.

“Two of them are relatively close to where we are.” His gnarled finger slid to the left from above the location of the fortress.

One of the circles he’d pointed to was northwest of our location and the other was west-southwest. Like he’d said, they weren’t too far away. I wasn’t especially confident in my map-reading abilities, but I gauged that it would be a half day journey on horseback. The last of the three was quite a bit farther away, but I figured that it shouldn’t take more than two days to get there, accounting for breaks in other villages along the way.

“I’m terribly sorry about how long it took me to investigate. I thought I’d get it done quicker.” Captain Lieber bowed his head.

I hurriedly shook my head. “Not at all!”

I’m the one that asked you to investigate when you had free time from your patrols and marching practice... Of course that’ll take time!

Furthermore, I couldn’t possibly tell him that I was searching for the demon lord, so I was lucky that he’d taken up my vague request to begin with. I was so grateful to him for that.

“I truly appreciate your assistance,” I said. “Thank you for sparing time out of your busy schedule to investigate this for me.”

“You honor me,” said Captain Lieber, and then he gently narrowed his eyes.

Perhaps it was his deep-set facial features, or maybe it was his manly body, but his demeanor seemed to vacillate wildly—when he put on a stern expression, he looked fearsome, but the moment he smiled, he suddenly

seemed so friendly. The glimpse of his canines from within his large mouth and the laugh lines by his eyes made him appear much more approachable. He had a cute smile... Although I knew that wasn't the most appropriate description to use for a grown man.

I'd love to see him and his wife side by side, I thought. The pairing of a big, muscly man and a frail beauty... And they're head over heels for each other! Honestly, that's what I love to hear about. I'd be super interested to listen to his wife tell me about how they got together and hear her talk about her love.

Is there any way I can ingratiate myself to his wife? It'd probably be awkward if I just turned up to say hi.

For the moment, I rid my mind of thoughts about searching for the demon lord and instead busied myself with less noble desires.

But then I heard a loud noise, and my concentration was brought back.

"It's Walter," a deep voice called from beyond the door. "You called me?"

Oh, so that noise was a knock at the door.

Captain Lieber glanced at me and said, "There's someone I'd like you to meet. In order to keep your true identity a secret for the duration of your stay here, I have explained to my men that you are the daughter of a noble family. However, there might be some inconveniences for you if I'm the only one that knows who you really are. And so, I picked out a man I can trust."

So basically, one more person knows I'm a princess, and that person is on the other side of the door?

Captain Lieber granted the person entry. "Come in."

"Pardon me," sounded a monotonous voice. The door opened, and a young man entered.

"This is our force's esteemed and excellent vice-captain. Isaac, tell Her Highness who you are." Captain Lieber's eyes were pointed at me for the first half of the introduction and at the new arrival for the second half.

After being prompted to present himself, the vice-captain turned to face me.

He'd combed back his straight black hair, and his almond eyes were violet in

color. He had thin lips, thin eyebrows, and a well-chiseled nose, which were all arranged beautifully on his slender face—overall, it gave him the appearance of someone who was high-strung. He had the sort of face that would go well with a pair of thin, silver-framed spectacles, if they'd existed in this world. All in all, I could picture him more readily as a scholar than as a knight, but even so, I could tell through his clothes that his physique, although slender, was well toned. That should've come as no surprise though; the border defense force valued strength above all else, so clearly, a man who'd risen to the rank of vice-captain would have an aptitude for more than just desk work.

"I'm Isaac Walter."

His uninspired, blunt self-introduction lasted all of three seconds.

Over already?! So short!

"My name is Rosemary von Velfalt. I'll try to keep out of everyone's hair while they're working, and I'm sure it will be a pleasure to get to know you."

I smiled, trying my best to make it not look forced, but there was no reaction from Vice-captain Walter. Apparently, the pleasure was quite literally all mine.

The room fell into an awkward silence, which didn't seem to bother Vice-captain Walter. He didn't even raise an eyebrow. *This man's got nerves of steel!*

"Come on, Isaac... Don't be like that," chided Captain Lieber, looking uncomfortable.

But his words fell on deaf ears.

"Sorry about him, Princess," said Captain Lieber apologetically. "Don't let him get you down."

"I'm fine," I told him. And that was the truth—I was aware of how much of a disturbance it was for a princess to visit a place as important as a fortress on the border with Lapter. I felt lucky that I hadn't been told "get lost" to my face.

Vice-captain Walter was clearly *thinking* that, however. I could see it in his eyes... Well, not just his eyes. His attitude and stance, his entire body was screaming, *"You're in the way, so just go home already!"* At least, I thought so.

But tough luck, because I'm not going anywhere! I'm here for business, not

pleasure, I thought, conveniently forgetting that just moments before I'd been more concerned about whether I could meet Captain Lieber's wife than anything remotely related to my original objective.

What's that you say? I'm two-faced? La la la, I can't hear you!

"Okay, so he's an absolute joy to be around, as you can tell..." said Captain Lieber. "I do vouch for his helpfulness though."

"That's good to know," I said. I then turned to Vice-captain Walter and reiterated my earlier message with my brightest smile. "I'm sure it will be a pleasure to get to know you."

When I did, I saw a jitter in his bluish-violet eyes. Then, he squinted in irritation.

Ha ha, I can read him like a book. He's not great at hiding his thoughts, is he?

Although he was the worst candidate to be given the task of looking after a teenage girl, I could understand why Captain Lieber had selected him for the role.

People who can't lie really are an asset.

While I was smiling cheerfully, I heard a quiet chuckle from behind me. Finding that odd, I turned around to see what was happening, and I saw Sir Leonhart's shoulders trembling from his laughter.

Confused about what was so funny, I shot him a blank look.

"Sir Leon?"

"Pardon me. I was just struck by how strong you've become," he said with delight.

"Huh?!"

I instantly turned pale.

Nooooo! What have I done?! I screamed in my mind. What's he gonna think of me after seeing me act so awfully?! That's it. He thinks I'm terrible now.

A heroine would've been on the verge of tears in this situation! She would've put on a brave smile and said she was all right! Sure, I'm no heroine, but I surely

could've mustered a cuter reaction than what I did just now!

In my head, I pictured the shrine maiden, *Hidden World's* heroine. When the suitor characters had given her the cold shoulder, she'd sullenly cast her head down and begun to cry. Seeing that behavior, the men who'd paid her no attention had suddenly panicked. And then, she'd stuck out her tongue and teased, "Just pretending!" That impishness was so adorable.

That's what I'm missing! That girly charm! That cuteness! It's a bit late to have that epiphany, but still!!!

I didn't even know how to pretend to cry. I'd attempted it once in my past life, back in high school. I hadn't been able to wring out a single drop. I'd even tried to imagine emotional scenes from movies and replay tearjerker songs in my head, but nothing had worked. I always just got distracted. My mental rendition of those songs would switch to humming at points because I'd forgotten the lyrics, or my attention would turn to remembering the name of the character the actress played in another film... Pointless things like that would distract me from my goal of crying.

And yet, the realization of that made me feel so pathetic that I almost started to cry...a minute too late. *I needed these tears then, not now!*

But while my spirits had deflated, Sir Leonhart oddly seemed to be enjoying himself.

At least he's not disappointed or upset with me, I guess.

The Reincarnated Princess Searches

A long path stretched out before us, gently winding like a freehand curve drawn on paper. The fields on either side of us were barren due to the season, and a light blanket of snow covered the earth. Here and there, patches of mud broke through the snow cover, promising the coming of spring, but the breeze was still cold against my cheeks, and my breath still condensed and disappeared into the air.

I strained my eyes to discern the end of the narrow path, and when I did, I spied a settlement on the other side of a small hill. A collection of houses stood there, protected by a windbreak of planted trees. Behind the settlement was a small grove, and beyond that was a range of white hills.

It had taken a little over five hours of bobbing along on horseback to get here from the fortress, but we'd finally reached the first of the candidate villages.

I let out a weary sigh, dropping my guard. But then I realized that Sir Leonhart was peering at me, and I hurriedly clasped my hands over my mouth.

"You lasted quite a while. Well done." He smiled. "Let's find somewhere to rest before we venture in."

I felt so guilty... I'd been no help whatsoever—I hadn't been giving directions, and I hadn't been at the reins either. I'd just swayed from side to side on the saddle.

"I'll be—"

I'd been about to say, "*I'll be all right, so let's start with the investigation,*" but Sir Leonhart interrupted.

"Princess?"

He had such a wide grin on his face, but it scared me a little. I felt like a voice was talking over him, saying, "*I told you not to push yourself, didn't I?*" But, that was probably just my ears playing tricks on me.

“Let’s take a break,” he said slowly and emphatically.

“Okay...” I stood no chance against his fearsome smile, and I timidly nodded my head.

Sir Leonhart narrowed his eyes and set his gentle, kind gaze on me. But that sweetness was the sort a teacher would show a kid who just didn’t *get* it, or how an owner would look at a pet that could never learn any tricks. I felt conflicted, and I wasn’t sure whether to be happy or sad.

The horse trotted on, accompanied by the adorable clip-clop sound of its hoofbeats. Farther down the path, I spotted a flock of sheep in a fenced enclosure. Their absentminded *baas* were joined by a satisfying *woof*.

I glanced over and saw that a white dog was looking at me and barking—its big feather-duster tail wagged excitedly from side to side. He was a sheep dog, I imagined, but he seemed so friendly that I had to wonder whether he was actually getting his job done.

An old man was working nearby. He turned around to see what had distracted the dog and caught sight of us. His light-brown eyes, which were lined in crow’s feet, widened in surprise and then narrowed in suspicion.

Our eyes met, so I nodded in greeting. He took off his hat and nodded back at me, but he seemed a little nervous.

Sir Leonhart climbed off the horse and led it by the reins over to the fence. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” the old man replied. “Are you travelers?”

I could sense a note of wariness in both his tone of voice and his expression. Perhaps travelers were a rare sight here, or perhaps we didn’t seem like the traveling type.

“Yes. We’re here to visit a friend in the fortress on the border.”

The old man was visibly relieved. “Oh, in the border defense force?”

The border defense force must be held in high regard by the nearby villagers.

“Are you a knight yourself?” the man asked, examining Sir Leonhart from top to bottom.

“Something like that,” Sir Leonhart replied with a wry smile.

“You dress well,” the man continued, “and I’ve never seen a man so strong and handsome in these parts.”

“I’m nothing as impressive as a knight,” Sir Leonhart said.

“If you’re not a knight, then who the hell can call themselves one?” I wanted to quip.

No longer wary of us, the old man turned to look at me. I smiled sweetly at him, and he smiled back.

“And who’s this? What a beauty to be traveling with.”

“Her? She’s—” Sir Leonhart started, but the old man gave him no time to finish and instead said something outrageous.

“Your wife?”

“Wi—?!” Sir Leonhart looked unprepared to hear that. His expression was one of astonishment, and he seemed unable to form a response. My pupils had shrunk down to pinheads as well. The shock was just too much for my brain to keep up with.

We’d planned to tailor our cover story based on how the villagers reacted. If it seemed like our age gap was too large to get away with calling me Sir Leonhart’s sister, then we’d try a niece or daughter instead. I hated that, of course. Absolutely hated it.

But never once had we thought we’d be asked whether we were married.

I was a little...okay, very happy. The age gap will never shrink, but I wonder if this means that, on the outside at least, I’m starting to look okay at Sir Leonhart’s side?

Sir Leonhart cleared his throat and then said, “She’s my sister.” His cheeks seemed a little red, although maybe I was imagining what I wanted to see.

“Oh, right. Sorry about that. See, round here, there’re loads of couples as far apart in age as you two.”

“Don’t worry about it. We don’t look alike, and she’s much younger than me,

so people don't often realize we're siblings."

"But she's so young and pretty... I'll bet she means the world to you."

Sir Leonhart bashfully scratched the back of his head. "Well, you know. I can't help but dote on her."

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run around screaming gibberish.

Sir Leonhart was acting bashful while talking about *me*! I felt so happy and embarrassed, and I broke out into a smile. Although, technically, he was talking about his make-believe "sister" and not me. This was all just a cover story. And I was fine with that. Promise.

Sir Leonhart turned to me and held out his hand. "C'mere," he said.

My breathing stopped. *I never thought I'd get Sir Leonhart to read from my top ten list of must-hear phrases in a place like this!*

I tried desperately to act cool, but it took all my concentration to keep a grin at bay.

I mean, "C'mere"? Surely he knows what that's gonna do to me?!

"Thank you, brother."

Doing my best to act natural, I took Sir Leonhart's hand and, with his assistance, climbed down from the horse.

The old man bowed his head with a friendly smile.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello there. Are you on a trip with your handsome brother today?"

"I am. When I heard that he was going to see a friend, I begged him to let me come along. My brother's always away working, so I wanted to have some time to relax with him." The character I was playing idolized her older brother, but the line between the character and the actor was growing too blurred to make out anymore. I flicked my eyes toward Sir Leonhart—he smiled bashfully and patted my head.

Bliss! I have no regrets. I can die happy now.

"Well, there's nothing to do in this village, but I hope you enjoy it all the

same.”

I kept my worship of Sir Leonhart inside my mind, and on the outside I feigned an innocent smile and thanked the man. “Thank you, mister. Actually, I was wondering if you could help us. I enjoy going to see old buildings, and I heard there’s a temple here. Would you happen to know where it is?”

The man blinked. “A temple?” he asked, and for some reason, he seemed contrite. “Well, we *do* have one, but...” He smiled apologetically and turned around.

Confused by the look on his face, Sir Leonhart and I followed his gaze with our eyes. On the other side of the fence, I could see a building on the outskirts of the village. It was a masonwork structure built from limestone or something similar. However...I may have been mistaken, but it appeared to still be under construction.

Although it does look like a temple. Hang on... I know that I set the criteria for our search to be villages with a dilapidated shrine on their outskirts. Don't tell me...

A worrying suspicion was forming in my mind, and I turned back to the man, mouth agape.

“We did have an old temple, but the thing was falling apart,” he said, smiling awkwardly and running a hand through his white-streaked hair. “It was a hazard, so we decided to get it rebuilt. Bad luck, miss.”

Captain Lieber had told me that the initial investigation had taken a long time, so I should’ve been prepared for this outcome—there was no guarantee that a structure that’d stood here one year ago would still be here now.

And if something's falling to pieces...obviously you put it back together again. Otherwise someone might get hurt. Yeah, I get it. Makes sense. But...what happened to all the stuff inside?!

I subtly steered the conversation, trying to ascertain whether anything of historical value had been found inside the old temple, but the old man laughed the idea off as silly. He told me they had actually been surprised because there’d been hardly anything in there. Apparently, there’d been so little inside

that some of the villagers had questioned the need to rebuild the temple after its demolition.

So basically, we can assume that the demon lord wasn't stored here? Maybe they wouldn't have noticed his stone...but I doubt they'd miss a hidden room! Such a find would surely stick in their memories...

And so the first day of my search ended on a dissatisfying note.

I was deep in thought, my brow furrowed, but then I felt a large hand fall gently onto my head. I looked up, and Sir Leonhart was watching me with concern from his seat on the other side of the table.

“Don’t look so sad. We’ve only just begun, remember?”

His kind gaze and sweet voice captivated my attention, helping me forget where we were and why. I whimpered as I clutched at my chest and stricken heart.

It was tough enough on my raw emotions when he spoke casually to me without all the pomp of the royal court...but, on top of that, for him to pat my head? I had no hopes of being able to act normal.

Sir Leonhart, please stop trying to send my heart to a love-fueled demise with your doting older brother act. You're gonna get me interested in the wrong things...

“Mary?”

God, and he's calling me by my name too! I mean, I am aware that it's our cover story and Sir Leonhart is just playing a role, but still...

Somehow overcoming the urge to scream, I smiled. “It’s nothing, brother.”

“Okay,” he replied, and then he gently patted my head again.

“I’m told this restaurant dishes up nice food. We need something warm after being out in the cold.”

“Yeah...” I replied while narrowing my eyes in pleasure at the feeling of his large hand on my head.

I wish I could stay Sir Leonhart's sister forever... Wait, wait, wait! What am I saying?! His sister isn't what I'm aiming for!

God, that was a close one. I almost let the addictive sweetness of this scenario suck me into settling for sister... I will become part of the Orsein family, but through marriage, not adoption!

I wiped the sweat from my brow. Luckily, my unusual behavior appeared to have escaped Sir Leonhart's notice, and he turned around to call a waiter.

Sir Leonhart and I were in a restaurant in the village we'd visited. The place was relatively busy for the time of day—too late for lunch and too early for dinner. The patrons were mostly residents of the village, but occasionally, I'd spot a traveler as well. There were more people than I'd expected to find in a village this size, but it did make sense: this spot was well situated for a pit stop on journeys to and from Nevel's capital and Lapter.

When Sir Leonhart had finished ordering, I called out, "Si—Brother." *Whoops, almost forgot my character.*

He smiled at me and tilted his head. "Yes?"

The waitress froze solid, becoming collateral damage to the full power of his smile. Her ponytail bounced up and down as she darted back to the kitchen, hands on her face to hide her blushing cheeks.

Believe me, miss, I know the feeling! Sir Leonhart's smile is a force to be reckoned with!

"Mary?"

Yikes, I was tripping again.

"Ummm... What should we do when we're done here?" I asked.

"How about having a look around the village?"

The chances of this village being the one we wanted were slim to none. Even so, Sir Leonhart must've decided that we ought to inspect the area around the construction of the new temple.

I suppose it would be nice to see if the builders let anything interesting slip by.
"Okay then. And after that?"

“Let’s see... Back to the fortress after that, I think.”

“Not the next village?” I asked.

Sir Leonhart shook his head. “We wouldn’t get there before dark, and then you wouldn’t be able to see very much inside a dark temple.”

Ultimately, that was the right decision. We’d have less distance to travel if we headed straight for the second village on our list, but the timing didn’t work out. The roads would be more dangerous at night, and our search would stall in the darkness. We couldn’t be sure whether the second village would have an inn to stay at either. The underwhelming results from the first village had left me feeling restless, but rushing would get us nowhere.

I rid my head of impatience and uneasy feelings, then nodded.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes, which seemed to see right through me, narrowed gently.

“Here you go,” announced the returning waitress, perfectly timed with the end of our conversation. In front of me, she placed a deep wooden bowl full of soup and a flat plate loaded with bread. She did the same for Sir Leonhart.

The soup had a tomato base and was flavored with well-done lamb meat on the bone that had been sautéed with plenty of vegetables and beans. Though I was no expert on lamb, the waitress assured us it wouldn’t smell too gamey because the fat had been thoroughly cooked. I imagined it would be just fine.

For bread, there was a tough variety of roll. The top of the roll had been cross cut by a knife, and I assumed it was probably rye bread. In fact, I’d seen this exact type of roll before in *Kiki’s Delivery Service*.

Both the soup and the bread were piping hot, and my mouth watered at the scent that wafted up with the steam.

I’ll bet it’s scrumptious. But...I’m not sure how to go about eating the meat on the bone. I wish I had a knife and fork, but I can only see a spoon.

I glanced around at the other patrons and saw that they were all gnawing down on the meat like animals.

Ah...right. I guess, in a sense, those are the proper table manners for this...

I decided to see how Sir Leonhart was doing it, and our eyes met.

He must've noticed that I wasn't sure what to do, so he held out his hand in a wordless offer to remove the meat from the bone.

After a moment's thought, I shook my head. It didn't delight me to rip the meat apart with my teeth while Sir Leonhart was watching, but I had no idea how long our journey would last, and I didn't want him to mollycoddle me the whole time.

With new determination, I picked up the bone with my fingers and sank my teeth into the meat.

Even after being stewed, a savory flavor remained present in the meat, and it spread throughout my mouth. Next, I tasted the acidic tomato and the aromatic vegetables, all while the fragrance of herbs filled my nose. Juices were released from the meat the moment my teeth sank in. I held the lamb in my jaws and tugged, and the meat slid right off the bone. As I chewed, I covered my mouth with one hand.

The taste was peculiar, but it was nice and rich, and the soft fat melted in my mouth. I was sure that the herbs and tomatoes disguised the smell and enhanced the flavor.

"Delicious." The word slipped out of my mouth. When I raised my head, I saw that Sir Leonhart's eyes had gone wide. *Uh-oh, does he think I'm a slob?!*

"Is it?" he asked, smiling happily. I had no idea whether he'd noticed my panic or not.

Whew, I don't think I disgusted him.

As he began to eat his own meal, he seemed to be in a good mood. I continued eating as well, although an invisible question mark hung in the space above my head.

The rye roll almost burned my hands when I picked it up, so it must've been freshly baked. I held it in both hands and ripped it open from the middle, revealing a light-brown interior. The smell that wafted up to my nose was a little peculiar. I tore off a piece and tossed it into my mouth—I detected a sour note, and it was tougher to chew than wheat bread.

But I didn't mind. I liked it, in fact. It tasted even better when eaten together

with all the ingredients in the soup.

“It’s all tasty... The soup *and* the bread,” I remarked, giving my honest appraisal.

“Glad to hear it.” I hadn’t been speaking to anyone in particular, but a reply did come. However, the voice wasn’t Sir Leonhart’s.

Before I had a chance to figure out who’d spoken, a damp cloth was held out in front of my hands. I lifted my gaze from the cloth and found a man standing there. He was backlit by the sun’s rays that shone through the skylight, so I couldn’t see his face properly.

“Your hands’ll get messy, so use this.”

“Oh, er, thank you,” I replied.

“And thank you too. It’s hearing my meals called delicious that makes cooking them worthwhile.” After saying that, the man headed off to the kitchen. Before he left the dining area, he turned around and said, “Oh, just so you know, there’s plenty—enough for second helpings.”

His fine hair shared the rye bread’s light-brown color, and he’d grown his bangs and the back out slightly longer. His eyes were the same color as his hair, and they gave off a kind impression, either because of the long eyelashes that adorned them or the way they drooped in the corners. His pale, slender face looked somewhat androgynous, but the muscles that showed around his neck and from beneath his rolled-up sleeves clearly marked him as a man.

“Thank—”

Just as I was about to thank him, I froze. Not because I was stricken by his beauty, although he certainly was a pretty man. No, it was the sudden, strong feeling of *déjà vu* that had overwhelmed me.

I could say with all honesty that I’d never met him before. So why did I also feel like I knew him? The answer needed little thought, and I found it within seconds. This wasn’t a case of *déjà vu*—it was the same feeling I’d had with Crow.

I knew the man standing there from memories of my previous life... He was

the final important character from the otome game *Welcome to the Hidden World*.



He was a side character—a former assassin who’d played a substantial part of Crow’s route. He’d even shown up in the game as a restaurant worker. This man was gentle mannered, attractive, and always acted like a gentleman toward women. He’d been a favorite among the game’s players.

I must’ve stared for too long because he lowered his eyebrows in a troubled look and asked, “What’s wrong, miss? Is there something on my face?”

I snapped back to my senses and flung my head from side to side. “N-Nothing! You just happen to look like someone I know... Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” he said, before continuing with casual flirtation. “If anything, I’m glad I’ve found an excuse to strike up a conversation with a pretty little lady like yourself.”

Even without my knowledge of the game, I could tell that this was just more or less the way he greeted people. After all, there were no amorous undertones to his voice or his expression.

“Sorry, Ratte, can you give me a hand here?!” came a voice from the kitchen.

“Sure!” he replied, giving me a short wave before heading into the back.

That’s right, Ratte was his name! That’s what he called himself in the game too. So I really doubt I’ve got the wrong person, but...in the game, Ratte worked in a restaurant in the capital, not in a village on the border. Why would he be here? Crow was supposed to be an assassin for Lapter, but in this world he’s a spy for Nevel, so maybe things went differently for Ratte as well?

“What’s wrong, Mary?” Sir Leonhart looked at me with concern.

“Nothing,” I said, resuming my meal. I *was* curious, but I wouldn’t be able to find the answer by just thinking about it. So I decided to focus on the things at hand: eating the lovely meal in front of me before it got cold and not worrying the man I loved.

“That was lovely.”

The soup and the bread had been quite filling, but I’d managed to finish both because they’d tasted so good. I was stuffed and felt bloated.

So happy right now...

While I rubbed my stomach in a state of pure bliss, someone called to me. “Glad you enjoyed it.” Then, that person held out a cup for me. “Here’s some tea to wash it down,” said a smiling man.

It was Ratte.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“And here’s one for the handsome chap. I usually reserve these for the ladies, but I’ll make an exception because you’re with her.”

“Lucky me,” said Sir Leonhart with a wry grin, taking the cup.

I imagined Ratte would leave now, but instead, he set his tray and plate of food down on the table at the place to the left of Sir Leonhart.

I looked at him questioningly.

He pulled the chair out and sat down. “As thanks for the tea, mind if I join you? I’m on lunch break now.”

Clearly, he did things his own way...or maybe I should say that he acted a little forcefully—he’d asked our permission but hadn’t waited for an answer before sitting down. Although, he did sit next to Sir Leonhart rather than me, which reiterated his gentlemanly nature.

Ratte’s lunch consisted of stir-fried vegetables and flatbread. It was a hastily made work lunch, but it looked tasty nonetheless.

Despite his androgynous appearance, Ratte’s table manners were atrocious. Each mouthful was so big that the food disappeared in a flash.

I sipped my tea while watching him, stunned. The tea had a slight sweetness to it, and like the cooking, its flavor was distinctive but tasty.

After finishing his meal in record time, Ratte asked, “So, whereabouts do you two come from?”

“From the capital,” I answered truthfully, feeling no need to hide anything. After all, getting caught out for telling a bad lie wouldn’t do us any favors.

“Ah, I thought so. That explains why I could sense a sophisticated elegance in

you both.”

“Mister—”

Ratte waved his hand and interrupted Sir Leonhart. “I don’t like mister. Just call me Ratte.”

“All right. I’m Leon, and this is my sister Mary.”

I bowed my head slightly in greeting when Sir Leonhart introduced me.

“Leon and Mary, got it. Nice to meet you. What were we talking about?”

Though Sir Leonhart and I were playing siblings, we looked nothing alike...but Ratte didn’t seem to question it. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say he chose not to pry. In *Hidden World*, he’d been a master of knowing where people’s boundaries were, so he’d probably judged that it was a delicate matter to be left alone.

Sir Leonhart picked up Ratte’s prompting for the conversation to continue. “So were you born here, Ratte?”

“Nope. I’m not from Nevel. I’ve actually only been in this village for two, maybe three months. I was looking for somewhere with work and board, and I fortunately happened upon this place and got a job here.”

Oh, so Ratte wasn’t born in Nevel. I didn’t know that. He tended not to open up about himself in the game. There wasn’t much information about his backstory other than that he was a former assassin and an old friend of Crow’s. And Crow basically never spoke about himself either, despite being a suitor character, so the pair of them were steeped in mystery.

But if Crow was an assassin sent by Lapter, then maybe Ratte worked as an assassin for Lapter too.

At that point, something niggled my mind...

He wouldn’t...still be working as an assassin, would he?! This village was on the border with Lapter... That fact heightened my suspicions. But he is working in a restaurant, just like in the game, so it’s probably just the location that’s changed. Yeah, I’m overthinking it.

“So what brought you here from the capital? I doubt you fancied a little bit of

sightseeing out in the middle of nowhere.”

“We came to visit a friend in the fortress on the border,” answered Sir Leonhart, “and thought we’d have a look around the villages while we’re at it.”

“Oh, you know someone in the border defense force? Come to think of it, you do look quite knightly, Leon.” Hearing Sir Leonhart’s explanation, Ratte’s reaction was the same as the old shepherd’s. “You shouldn’t be dragging Mary around somewhere so dull.”

“I’m the one that twisted his arm, actually,” I explained. “I love seeing old buildings, and I heard there was an old temple in this village, so I begged my brother to take me there.”

I recycled the cover story I’d used with the old man because of the similarities in the conversation. I thought my acting should’ve been convincing, but Ratte suddenly froze. The next second though, his friendly smile had returned to his face, giving me no chance to think anything of it.

“Wow, I don’t see many young girls with that hobby.”

Ah, so that’s what surprised him. I guess it is a bit uncommon...

“Do you think it’s strange?” I asked.

“Not at all. I’m a big fan of that too, so I feel a kindred bond. Shame though—too bad this village’s shrine got rebuilt.”

“I know, right? That’s why we were just talking about going to another village.”

Ratte rested his chin in his hands as he spoke. “Ooh, sounds great. If you find anything, let me know. I’ll go have a look when I get a day off work.” Then, he tilted his head and added further pressure by asking, “Deal?”

His long bangs swayed as his head tilted, allowing his prominent brow to be seen. His handsome forehead looked like a doll’s, in part because of how very white it was. However, there was a scar on his porcelain skin.

He instantly noticed where I was looking. “Oops, you don’t want to see that.” He smiled awkwardly and pulled his bangs back over. “I walked into something while I was still half-asleep. It’s nothing serious.”

“Oh... Do try to be careful.”

The skin around the red scar had turned a funny color and become taut. It didn't *look* like something a little bump could do...but it seemed like he didn't want to talk about it, so I left the topic there, choosing not to question it.

We carried on our conversation for a short while, and then Ratte got to his feet, ready to return to work.

“Enjoy the rest of your time here,” he said after stacking the dishes and cutlery onto the tray, and then he walked off toward the kitchen.

I watched him leave, although not for any particular reason. Sir Leonhart, however, reached out his hand and grabbed the damp cloth that Ratte had given me.

“Ratte,” he called.

“Hmm?”

As Ratte turned around, Sir Leonhart chuckled the cloth at him. Ratte caught the cloth with his right hand without any trouble.

“You forgot that.”

“Thanks.”

Sir Leonhart hadn't handed the cloth over, he'd thrown it. Neither Ratte nor any of the patrons seemed to think anything of that, but it'd surprised me. Ratte had surprised me too. He'd effortlessly caught the cloth despite carrying a tray full of stacked dishes in one hand.

It can't be easy to turn around and catch something thrown from behind you without losing your balance. And unless I'm misremembering, Ratte used his left hand while he was eating. What masterful control he has over his nondominant hand...

Even after he'd entered the kitchen, my eyes remained fixed on the spot where Ratte had been. After a while though, I turned to look at Sir Leonhart. I opened my mouth to speak to him, but I shut it again at once when I saw that he was staring toward the kitchen and scowling.

But as soon as he noticed me looking at him, his expression returned to its

usual kindness.

“Shall we get going?” he suggested.

“Yeah...”

Seeing him acting like this, I got the feeling that I should tell him what I knew about Ratte. But I didn't know for sure whether Ratte was still an assassin, and I had neither proof nor evidence to suggest that he worked for Lapter. Worst case, prejudicing him wrongly might let the real spy get away.

For a short while, I debated internally about how best to tell Sir Leonhart.

The Reincarnated Princess Researches

In the end, we didn't manage to find any clues about the demon lord. We tried searching around the vicinity of the temple and talking to the construction workers, but every road was a dead end and nothing of note turned up.

I returned to the fortress with my shoulders slumped, but once inside, I rallied my spirits and vowed to have another go tomorrow.

However, the next morning, I stood expressionless by the window, watching the torrent of snow falling heavily. I listened to the wind, and its thunderous roar sounded like an earthquake.

The weather for the day turned out to be...a blizzard. Apparently, this was unusual for the time of year, even this far north.

God, what did I do to offend you?

Vice-captain Isaac Walter walked over to where I was standing by the window and droned, "I'm sure you know what I'm about to tell you, but you're to remain inside the fortress for today." The reflection of his face in the glass was as emotionless as a doll. Despite that, I felt like he'd told me, "*Don't you dare make any work for me.*"

Don't worry. Recklessness is my calling card, but even I'm not brave enough to blunder out into the middle of a blizzard. "I know. I'll stay put for the day."

"As long as we're clear about that," said Vice-captain Walter bluntly. He then turned his gaze away from the scenery outside the window to look at me. "The captain will be absent until tomorrow. Speak to me if there's anything you need."

"Captain Ernst isn't here?" I asked.

"His wife is doing poorly."

I flung my face up. "What?!"

Vice-captain Walter seemed slightly shocked. He broke eye contact nervously,

lowered his gaze, and sighed. “He’s told me before that the bad weather affects her health. He has requested I inform you that this happens all the time, so don’t work yourself up too much.”

“Oh... I see.”

I do know that plenty of people feel less than their best when the weather’s bad. I used to get plagued by storm-induced migraines too, and I think it had something to do with the air pressure.

I hope she’s doing okay. It’s worrying—weather this cold really does a number on people prone to ill health. Maybe I should see if the captain will let Wolf take a look at her once we’re done searching for the demon lord. It sounds like she’s just naturally frail rather than suffering from some specific illness, so there might be nothing a doctor can do. Regardless, there’s no harm in asking.

Sir Leonhart, probably out of consideration for my feelings, offered his own input. “When this blizzard has run its course, let’s ask the captain if we can pay her a visit and see how she’s faring.”

I nodded at his suggestion, and he lifted his hand to pat me on the head, seemingly out of habit. But then, he stopped himself. He must’ve gotten used to pretending we were siblings. Realizing that he wasn’t currently supposed to be my big brother, he put on an embarrassed smile and waved his hand around, having nowhere to put it.

Oh, so cute, so precious... Yikes, my vocabulary has shrunk.

Vice-captain Walter completely ignored our conversation and brought us back on track. “You’re free to do as you wish, so long as you remain within the fortress. I shall be in my office should you need anything.”

Do what I want? But everyone’s working, so I can’t just traipse around everywhere. I guess I could hide myself away and get on with some reading, or...

“If there’s any way I can help out, then—”

“Not necessary,” interrupted Vice-captain Walter, raising his hand slightly and bluntly turning down my offer.

Yeah, figures, I thought, letting out a hollow chuckle.

Vice-captain Walter paid no attention to me, but he did turn to Sir Leonhart, looking like he'd just gotten an idea. "Captain Orsein, if you're not busy, would you mind overseeing our knights' training? The younger ones who idolize you have been giddy with excitement for the last few days, making it difficult to get anything done. It would be wonderful if you could knock some sense into them."

"I don't mind, but..." Sir Leonhart looked at me with his eyebrows lowered, seeming troubled. He was probably reluctant to part with me because he was here to be my guard.

At that point, I hit upon the perfect plan to allow Sir Leonhart to perform his duties while simultaneously satisfying my own desires. "I'd like to come along too."

"No."

My request was, yet again, bluntly refused. *Curses!*

Sir Leonhart frowned as he explained his refusal. "The training swords might have dulled blades, but they can still inflict serious injuries on contact. It's too dangerous."

I really don't want to miss this chance to see Sir Leonhart in action... It would be so cool. However, I knew how protective he was of me, so the likelihood of getting him to agree was low.

"I shall accompany Your Highness in Captain Orsein's absence."

"You *will*?" I asked in disbelief, stunned. It had come as a shock that Vice-captain Walter would volunteer himself to babysit me.

"Yes," he confirmed. "However, I am a busy man, so you will have to stay inside my office with me while I work. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Of course."

With the discussion wrapped up, Sir Leonhart left for the indoor training grounds, and I accompanied Vice-captain Walter to his office.

The room was as tidy and organized as I'd expect from a fastidious man like him. Other than a bookcase, an office desk, and a lounge set, the room was

bare of objects. Oddly though, it still looked homely.

“You’re welcome to occupy yourself however you wish, and you may browse any of the volumes on the bookcase.”

Vice-captain Walter spared one glance for me as I stood there aimlessly, and then he picked up a document from the stack of papers on his desk. The room fell silent, save for the sounds of him writing, and he paid no further attention to me.

I guess he just plans to ignore my presence? To be honest, I think that works out just fine.

Stepping over to the bookcase, I scanned the titles of the volumes lined along the shelves. There was a wide selection of reading material, from historical accounts to specialized military texts on tactics and troop formations, medical books, maps, and more. However, I caught no glimpse of any light reading material like novels.

I wagged my index finger in front of the rows of spines upon the shelves. Then, one book in particular caught my interest, and my finger stopped. I pulled it out.

This one wasn’t like the rest—it was just a bundle of paper sandwiched between two pieces of cardboard and tied together by a string that passed through two cut-out holes. This binding had been done by an amateur, not a professional.

I went to open it, but I hesitated, worrying that it might be a diary or a collection of reports which weren’t meant for my eyes.

“I did say that you are free to browse any of the books on the bookcase,” said the vice-captain. He had clearly noticed my reluctance and guessed what I was thinking, but when I glanced over, I saw that he wasn’t even looking at me. Without lifting his eyes from his documents, he continued, “It’s a collection of folklore from Nevel’s northeast. I’m not sure whether it will entertain you, but feel free to read it if you’d like.”

“Folklore!” Wow! That sounds so interesting! I wanna pull the maps down too so I can reference them as I go. I can cross-reference with the history books as

well! “I’ll absolutely do that.”

As I enthusiastically took maps and history books from the shelves, I felt a pair of eyes watching me. I glanced over my shoulder and found that Vice-captain Walter’s gaze was no longer focused on his documents. He was staring at me. His face was a mix of surprise and confusion, and I wasn’t sure what to do.

Uh? He told me I could look at them, right? So why’s he acting so puzzled?

Was it just common courtesy that I was supposed to decline? Oh my God, so dumb. Honestly, you told me I could read it, so don’t get surprised when I do. If you don’t want me to, don’t just hope I’ll figure that out!

I busied myself making mental excuses to justify my faux pas. But I wasn’t brave or dumb enough to say any of them out loud, and a cold sweat began to trickle down my spine.

“I can’t?” I asked nervously.

At that, Vice-captain Walter snapped out of it. He shook his head. “You can. Again, I’ve said that you’re free to read it. I was just...a little surprised.”

“Surprised?”

“To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think you’d actually *want* to read it. The contents don’t seem to be something a princess would find even the slightest bit interesting.”

Ahh, so that’s why—he didn’t mind me reading it, but he thought I wouldn’t be interested enough to actually crack it open.

“I find it fascinating, personally,” I told him.

“What are you planning to do with the maps and the history books?”

“Facts about history and the local geography are often woven into the lessons that folklore teaches, so I thought it’d be fun to use them as a reference...”

My answer was honest, but my voice began to trail off near the end. Why? Because I’d realized something.

Is my way of enjoying this incredibly obsessive?

But I’m not doing this just for fun! I think it might give me a hint about finding

the demon lord. No, honestly, I do... I mean, sure, I was that high school girl that wandered through the city streets with old maps. And I was the girl whose friends had called her out for her dull hobby... But, in my old world, they offered proper tours for this sort of thing, so it wasn't just me who enjoyed this stuff...probably.

Vice-captain Walter said nothing for a while, but then he stood up from his desk.

“Just a moment,” he said before walking over to the room’s entrance. He opened the door and, before leaving, looked back at me just once and warned, “Under no circumstances are you to leave this room.”

After a few minutes of waiting, he returned carrying documents in both hands. He deposited the sheaves of paper on the sofa with a thud, right next to the spot where I was sitting. I froze, my face a picture of surprise, but Vice-captain Walter ignored that and lined the papers up orderly on his desk.

“What you are currently holding is the simplified version. *This* version is a more detailed collection. It has been arranged roughly by region. Also, when two stories likely share a common subject, I have indicated that with a number on the right-hand edge. You can reference them against this sheet of paper, which has a key for the numbers and subjects.”

All of that came spewing out in a single breath, and it overwhelmed me. Some carefree part of my brain noted how characteristic of him it was that I could immediately understand everything he said—it was likely due to his consistent tone of voice, despite how quickly he was speaking. I glanced up at his face and saw that he wore no distinct expression (as ever), but there did seem to be a twinkle in his eyes.

Oblivious to my staring, he unfolded a large sheet of paper.

“On this map, I’ve jotted down the numbers that relate to the subjects, and I have also drawn a distribution diagram. Use this if you’d like to know the topography in more detail. I wouldn’t rely on it too heavily, as it was all handwritten by me, but feel free to use it.”

“Th-Thank you.” Although stunned, I expressed my gratitude and took the map, and at that point, our eyes finally met.

All at once, it seemed like he realized what he'd been doing. He pursed his lips and awkwardly broke eye contact. "I'm sorry about that."

While I had been just watching in wide-eyed bafflement before, I slowly began to process what had happened. I'd seen this behavior before... It was the way a geeky person acts when they find someone who shares an obsession with their hobby.

I know how it feels. You barely ever get the chance to geek out, so when you do, you get so excited that you rush to get all your words out. And you get so eager to say "This is me! This is what interests me!" that you don't give the other person a chance to speak. I've been there. And then when you're done talking, you realize what's just happened and feel so embarrassed and awkward. I've so been there.

"It will give me great pleasure to read," I said, smiling.

Vice-captain Walter gave a slight nod of his head. His face was as unchanging and expressionless as ever, but he did seem slightly embarrassed.

His research turned out to be quite well put together. The simpler version had all the main points recorded in one place, and I could find a fuller account by checking the more complex one if I really wanted to dig down. *So I can pick which bits I want to see in detail and keep the rest simple? So useful! He sure knows how to design with the end user in mind!*

He's clearly a master of office work. I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that Vice-captain Walter had a hand in researching the information I asked Captain Lieber to look into.

At first, I'd been engrossed in the stories out of pure interest, but when I was done reading some of them, I noticed something. This wasn't a topic to bring up with Vice-captain Walter right now though. No, I would need to take the materials with me to discuss with Sir Leonhart.

"Walter."

"Yes?" He looked up from the documents he'd been reading and turned to me.

He was acting more friendly than I could have imagined possible a few hours

ago. Though, it probably wasn't because he liked me more now; most likely, his perception of me had simply undergone a slight change. He struck me as a shy sort of person, so the more cordial reception was probably down to me receiving an upgrade in his eyes from total stranger to geek with a shared interest.

"Would you mind if I borrowed these documents for the night?"

"Not at all. There's far too much material to get through in one sitting, so you're welcome to read them at your leisure while you're here with us."

I'd expected a refusal, so his generous acceptance came as a pleasant surprise. He'd probably anticipated my request from the beginning, given how much there was.

"I'll take them to your room later."

"Oh no, you don't have to put yourself out."

"It's fine. It's no bother to me, and all these documents would be too much for you to carry on your own, so let me do this for you. And, by the way..." Vice-captain Walter's words came to a stop, and he fumbled around in his pocket, pulling out an oxidized-silver pocket watch. He checked the time and then looked back up. "It's lunchtime. Let's go to the mess hall."

Hearing that, I suddenly realized how hungry I was. The unchanging blizzard blocking our view beyond the window had made it difficult to discern the passage of time, although I'd been concentrating so much that I wouldn't have noticed anyway.

I nodded obediently, stood up, and followed behind Vice-captain Walter.

Captain Lieber had prepared a meal for us in the spare room on our first day, and after that, Sir Leonhart and I had eaten on the road, so this would be my first visit to the fortress's mess hall. I couldn't wait.

There had been an offer to arrange for all my meals to be in the spare room so that I wouldn't have to mix with the common rabble, but I'd refused. I didn't want them to go out of their way for me, and I wasn't a typical noble girl anyway. Besides, I was more than used to chowing down with a large group of people.

I skipped along to the mess hall, but as we entered, we were greeted by the sound of men shouting. I almost wrote that off as normal and just the result of a large number of people gathered in one place, but I changed my mind when I saw the scowl on Vice-captain Walter's face.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked, his brow deeply furrowed. He hadn't raised his voice, but his clear tone was heard by all. The men who'd had their backs to us all flinched in unison.

"V-V-Vice-captain!"

Everyone stood up straight when they realized that their superior was there.

"S-Sorry for the commotion," stuttered the man nearest to us. "We—"

Vice-captain Walter interrupted the man. "I didn't ask for an apology, Sergeant Pascal."

"Yes, sir!"

"Explain, and keep it short."

"The resident chefs have been held up in the village that they were buying supplies from, so we had some of the soldiers make everyone's lunch—"

"I have already received a report about the chefs' delays, and I believe I told you to keep it short."

"Sorry! The only men not occupied with anything else were all awful at cooking, so the lunch tastes like shi—um, has a rather distinctive taste!"

Ah, got it. So they're all flipping out about how horrible the food is. That's a shame. I was really looking forward to eating something nice.

"Oh yes, I'm sure you were all so busy. I must be imagining the blizzard that's preventing anyone from stepping foot outside," said Vice-captain Walter with a quizzical look.

Pascal grew paler than he had been before, and he threw his head down into a bow. "Forgive us! We were all desperate to get in on Sir Orsein's lesson!"

Vice-captain Walter let out a sigh while looking down at the top of Sergeant Pascal's head.

“Enough. I share some of the blame for underestimating his popularity. More importantly, is *any* of the food suitable for a young lady’s palate?”

Every knight present shifted their gaze away from Vice-captain Walter to me by his side. Uncomfortable in the spotlight, I smiled at them, not sure what else to do.

Aaand...they all hurriedly looked away. *How horrible of them!*

“We have a bit of fruit and some bread left...”

A second sigh spilled through Vice-captain Walter’s pretty lips. He turned back to me. “I apologize, Lady Mary, but I must ask you to wait. I shall make lunch for you myself.”

“Vice-captain?!” shouted one of the men.

“Don’t!” screamed another. “You can’t subject a sweet noble girl’s stomach to that torture!”

“She’s a hundred times better off eating the awful food we’ve already got!” wailed a third.

“What are you all implying?” snapped the vice-captain.

The knights around us had turned down Vice-captain Walter’s request to cook, and he appeared to be angered by their reactions. I realized that he must be just like Klaus...oblivious to his own culinary inadequacy.

“Excuse me,” I said, raising a hand, and everyone turned to me once more. “I wouldn’t mind doing the cooking.”

In the kitchen, I fastened the string of a borrowed apron and rolled up my sleeves. First, I decided to take a look at the meal that had gone wrong—they’d made a simple vegetable soup in a large pan. *I’d love to find out how exactly they managed to get this wrong...*

“The vegetables were only half-cooked, and it was too salty,” explained the man who’d been called Sergeant Pascal. He lifted the pan’s lid.

The sergeant had stiff red hair and sanpaku eyes of the same color. His face

looked a bit fierce, but his voice was tender.

“I see.”

I poured some of the soup into a small bowl and tasted it. *Yeah, I can taste the salt. I could just dilute it with water... But that would weaken the vegetable flavor, and that'd be a waste.*

After a little thought, I turned to Sergeant Pascal. “Do you have butter, flour, and eggs available?”

Although he seemed a little taken aback, he left to fetch them, and in the meantime, I lit the fire beneath a pan.

He came back and gave me the butter, which I melted on the heat, and when it began to bubble, I sprinkled the flour on top. I slowly stirred the mixture with a wooden spatula while keeping an eye on the distance between the pan and the fire so as not to scorch it. Once the butter and flour had all mixed together into a roux, I took it off the flame.

“What are you making?” asked Sergeant Pascal, looking puzzled.

“Ummm...”

I looked up at him, and situated a little bit behind him, I could see a large group of knights (including Vice-captain Walter), watching me from the entrance to the kitchen. *If I try to explain things in a way that all of them can understand, I'll be too distracted and will probably mess up the cooking.*

Unsure what else to do, I put on a forced smile and said, “It’s a secret.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I heard one soldier yelp and another scream.

“Say that again!”

What’s that supposed to mean?! I don’t know what about this is getting them so excited, but I do know that they’re gonna end up in the cells for lèse-majesté.

To be honest, it was nothing short of scary seeing these grown men cradling their heads and moaning. *Now I know how female teachers feel when they join a boys’ school. You get their attention, sure, but you’re also treated like some sort of mythical creature.*

After I let out a lifeless laugh, I heard a painful *thwack*. Vice-captain Walter had handed down some good old-fashioned “instruction.” *Yeah, show ‘em!*

Slowly, I added milk to the flour and butter mixture. I stirred, poured a bit more milk, and repeated that over and over, just a little bit at a time. Once I’d added enough milk, I put the pan over the flame once more.

I reflexively went to add some salt, but I pulled my hand back in time.

I nearly forgot that the soup is already too salty... So I’ll just add a tiny pinch of salt, stir some more... And we’re done! We have white sauce.

I grabbed some chicken meat and a few onions, fried them, and threw them into the failed soup, which I’d brought to a boil again. Then, I added the white sauce and stirred it into the soup while pouring in a bit more milk.

After some minor adjustments for flavor, I was finished. I’d successfully made cream stew.

“Delicious...!!!”

“I’ve been to restaurants in the capital, and I’ve never eaten something this good!”

“Someone give me another five servings.”

“Back off! We agreed already—one serving per person! If I don’t get any more, you don’t either!”

“Silence! You’re all behaving disgracefully!” Mother—I mean Vice-captain Walter—gave a stern telling off to the rowdy high school boys—I mean knights—as they were eating. He then turned to me and apologized.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said, looking genuinely disappointed. “As our guest, you shouldn’t have had to cook our meal, and you shouldn’t have to see such appalling behavior.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine—this dish wasn’t difficult to make.” My meal had honestly been quite simple.

“No, that can’t be true,” said a knight. “It was like watching magic happen.

You didn't make a new meal, you took a failed meal and actually made it delicious."

Okay, "magic" is going too far... I just touched it up a bit, and I was only able to do that because the failed meal was a vegetable soup.

Well, anyway, time for me to eat too.

While I was pouring the stew into my bowl, Sir Leonhart arrived. His lesson must've ended.

He walked in, surrounded by knights, and his eyes grew wide when he spotted me.

Yeah, his face is clearly saying "What the hell is going on?" Honestly, what the hell is going on...?

The time was almost seven at night, and the place was the fortress's guest room. This was where I'd been told I could stay during my time here.

Sir Leonhart arrived at exactly the time I'd specified, and he was wearing a difficult expression, somewhere between disappointed and annoyed.

"Are you disappointed in me...?" I asked hesitantly.

"Let's see... Should I be?"

Yeah... For a whole bunch of reasons. For inviting a man to my room at night despite being an unmarried girl... For making not just lunch but also dinner for all the knights...

Seeing me grow pale, Sir Leonhart smirked. "I'm not. Given what we'll be discussing, you made the right decision."

He didn't seem too pleased though.

So does he have a problem with me cooking dinner?

I asked him in a roundabout way, and when I did, he frowned.

"You simply helped because you thought they needed it, correct? If so, there's no reason for me to be disappointed. It's just..."

“It’s just...?”

“Nothing.”

This was an uncharacteristically poor method of deflecting for Sir Leonhart. Even I could tell that something was up, and I was often less than observant. But the look on his face made it clear that he didn’t want to talk about it, so I had to give up on pressing him. It was the least I could do—whenever I’d not wanted to talk about something, Sir Leonhart hadn’t hounded me. So, while it grated me, I decided to put up with that feeling.

I had to shift my attention away from Sir Leonhart’s evasiveness and onto the topic at hand—namely, the reason I’d asked him here in the first place. I thumbed through the documents I’d received from Vice-captain Walter, found the map, and sprawled it across the desk. Then I briefly explained how the writing on the map and the documents linked together.

“I see,” Sir Leonhart said, gazing at the map with fascination. “That’s an interesting hobby.”

“I think that one of the purposes of folklore is to warn children away from taboos and places of danger,” I explained.

Fairy tales were often a loving parent’s way of informing their children of things to be wary of or dangerous places to stay away from. For example, stories could warn that children who stay up at night get carried away by the demon lord or that monsters lurk in the sea to pull people underwater.

“I had hoped that the demon lord would turn up in a lot of the folklore if he really is sealed somewhere near here.”

“It sounds like there aren’t as many stories of him as you’d hoped.”

“To be more accurate, there were basically none.”

Sir Leonhart squinted with suspicion. “That...seems strange.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. “Every culture around the world, not just Nevel, has plenty of stories about the demon lord. So why is this the only place with none? My best guess is that the people who lived here long ago wanted to erase all knowledge of the demon lord from people’s minds.”

I'd initially thought I would find *more* stories about the demon lord because he was sealed here, but it was actually the opposite. Precisely because that great evil resided here, there was a need to block out the threat of the demon lord from the collective cultural consciousness... That way, nobody would get interested in him, and no information would fall into the hands of those that wished to bring him back.

"Instead, as though to make up for it, there's much mention of 'evil spirits.' Children who didn't do as their parents told them would be led astray by evil spirits and become unable to find their way home."

There was a variety of them: fire spirits, tree spirits, dark spirits...and there was no set form that they came in. They could be pretty women, or little boys, or plenty of other things, but the stories all shared a common central element—children would be tricked by a spirit into entering the forest at night, then get lost there and never return to their families. Their parents would search for them, and eventually, a spirit that looked identical to their child would come home to them.

On first reading, the story seemed reminiscent of changelings from the old European traditions. But the more I thought about it, the more I saw a link between these stories and the demon lord. A fake that seemed like the real person but wasn't... That idea seemed to be an allusion to how the demon lord would resurrect in a new body, although I might've been overthinking it.

"So you're saying that these 'evil spirits' were created to replace any mention of the demon lord and simultaneously ward off intrusion in the place he is sealed?"

"Yes. But there are so many stories about the evil spirits that I haven't been able to pin down a specific location."

I'd hoped that the distribution diagram would help me narrow down the search for the temple, but I'd had no such luck. This made sense; if analyzing the distribution of stories could be used to pinpoint the demon lord, then there would've been no point hiding the temple in the first place.

I'd done little more than flick through the research so far, so there was a good chance that more discoveries were waiting to be found.

“But so many of the stories involve wandering into the woods, so maybe the temple—”

“—is inside the woods,” Sir Leonhart finished.

After nodding, I pointed to a marking on the map. “I checked with Walter, and he told me there’s a forest near this temple. It’s the one in the village farthest from the fortress.”

“We should investigate that one first then. We’ll depart tomorrow, weather permitting, so get your things ready.”

“Okay,” I said in acknowledgment.

Sir Leonhart got up from the sofa. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, preparing to leave as though all our business was settled.

“Ah, wait!” I called, stopping him. “There’s more I want to tell you.”

He sat back down and tilted his head slightly to one side, prompting me to speak.

“Um... Do you remember that man from the other day? The one we met while we were getting lunch in the village?”

Sir Leonhart’s expression grew stern at the man’s mention. “The man called Ratte.”

I sat up straight, took a deep breath, then nodded. “Yes, him.” I wasn’t sure I’d be able to properly convey what I wanted to, but I had to try, or else I’d regret it. “The truth is...I’ve known about him, even before that day.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Sir Leonhart, confused. “You’ve met him before?”

I shook my head. “Not in person. The first time I saw him was in a dream.”

Sir Leonhart’s eyes flew wide open. Thankfully, he knew what I meant when I said “dream.”

I proceeded to tell Sir Leonhart everything I knew about Ratte: how he ought to have been working at a restaurant in the capital, how he was a former assassin, how he was a friend of one of Lapter’s assassins who was currently

working under my father as a spy for Nevel.

I did my best to stick to just the facts, trying to keep conjecture out of my account. My explanation was probably pretty tough to follow, likely the erratic kind where a few instances of “slow down” might be in order.

However, Sir Leonhart listened until the end without interrupting.

“And that’s everything I know about him.”

By the time I was done, I felt so nervous that I thought my heart might pop. My pulse was thumping loudly, as though I’d just been running for my life.

After a short silence, Sir Leonhart softly said, “I see. I recognized that his reflexes surpassed those of an ordinary person... So he’s a former assassin? But now it all makes less sense.”

“How come?”

“Perhaps I’m thinking too much, but he struck me as *too* suspicious.”

“Too suspicious?” I repeated.

Sir Leonhart appeared momentarily hesitant. “He is most likely an expert of his craft. If he were attempting to target us, he would’ve picked a better act.”

Now that he mentions it, that makes sense. If we were his targets, he probably wouldn’t tell us that he was looking for a temple too, because that would just arouse our suspicions. He probably wouldn’t have revealed that he was ambidextrous by catching the hand towel either.

“However, it would be far too strange to think that he’s just an ordinary villager.”

So he’s too suspicious to be an ordinary person and too careless to be an assassin. What about a spy for Lapter? His behavior would seem more natural if we assume he didn’t know our identities and just thought we were travelers who might have useful info.

The harder I thought, the less I understood.

“We won’t be able to find the answer just by thinking about it right now, so let’s call it a day,” suggested Sir Leonhart.

“Okay,” I replied, agreeing. My mind was a mess.

Sir Leonhart stood up to leave for real this time, but then it seemed like he remembered something and he paused.

“Princess.”

I raised my head and found his kind eyes staring back at me.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Huh...?”

“You always try to deal with everything by yourself, so I’m glad that you came to me for my opinion.” He smiled bashfully. “That’s all. Now then... Good night.”

He stepped out the door, leaving me behind, frozen in absolute shock. For a while, I did nothing, just sat there dazed, but as I began to comprehend what he’d said, a blush crept up my cheeks.

I collapsed onto the sofa and fought the urge to cheer out loud.

I wasn’t ready! So sly!

And to use such a tender voice to say good night... Oh my God! Yes, please!

I sank my face into the sofa and writhed around, and it took thirty minutes for me to finally calm down. But every time I tried to think about something else, my mind would drift back to that moment.

In the end, I didn’t get a wink of sleep that night.

A Knight's Recollection

"Dinner was so tasty."

"Lady Mary was so cute."

"That lunch was tasty too..."

"Lady Mary sure is beautiful..."

Every man cleaning up after our meal came out with more or less the same thoughts, and they all had the same stupid looks on their faces. To be honest, it was creepy seeing these musclebags blushing.

"All of you need to snap out of it! You're driving me nuts." I smacked each of the four men on the back of the head in turn.

They yelped and then glared at me.

"Come on, Sergeant Pascal! You couldn't take your eyes off her either!"

"Yeah! You really put on the nice guy act for her, trying to sound all gentle."

I glared at him. "You say something?"

"No, nothing, sir!" Both of the complainers stood up straight and averted their eyes.

I sighed heavily while listening to the sounds of the dishes clattering together. Daydreaming knights had become a common sight in recent days at the border defense force where I, Pascal von Meier, worked. This was partially due to the presence of Leonhart von Orsein, the captain of the royal guard and the one people called the Black Lion.

Most of the young knights looked up to him as a role model, and I did too. I'd always wanted the chance to spectate one of his sparring matches at least once in my life, so imagine my surprise that I was fortunate enough to receive direct instruction from him... It was like a dream. I must've used up a lifetime's worth of luck for this opportunity.

But the knights had their heads in the clouds for another reason too: a lady had arrived with Captain Orsein. Her name was Mary, and she was gorgeous, with wavy black hair and blue eyes. I'd heard that she was a noble girl from a prestigious family, but she acted relaxed around us, making no distinction between noble and commoner. Her good looks were an artist's dream, but she didn't let them go to her head, and she was so kind.

Moreover, today we'd learned that she could cook. These knights didn't see many women, and here was a girl who embodied their every ideal. It was no surprise that they'd become obsessed with her.

The knights resumed their conversation as they stacked the dried dishes on the shelves.

"That soup at lunch really was tasty though. I need to ask her how to make it."

"Right?! I've never eaten something so good!"

I probably should've told them to focus on their work, but they were getting the job done, so I let it slide. I began to wipe down a table while listening in on their conversation.

"She really is something else though. And not just with the cooking... No ordinary person could get along *that* well with our vice-captain."

"You can say that again. I've never seen him have a full conversation with a woman before."

"That pretty face of his gets him loads of attention from the ladies in town, but they never get anywhere. They have a tough time getting him to speak for longer than five seconds."

Poor guy, I thought after listening to their gossip.

The man in question, Vice-captain Isaac Walter, was an extraordinarily talented individual. He was calm and collected, his mind worked quickly, and to top it off, he was fearsome with a sword. He wasn't the easiest person to get along with, but every knight here knew that they could count on him, and they respected him for it.

But...it would be a lie to say that I'd always thought so highly of him. I'm not

ashamed to admit that I'd been scared of him at first, and I'd cursed my bad luck at being assigned to this unit. Most of the men had thought the same way. If Captain Ernst hadn't been around to bring a bit of cheer to the place, the force would've disintegrated. Calling the vice-captain "shy" didn't capture the extent of his secluded nature.

"And you *know* something's up when the vice-captain volunteers to make the lunch himself."

"Yeah, in more ways than one. I'm glad Lady Mary made it out okay..."

The knights' eyes grew vacant.

Vice-captain Isaac appeared to be a flawless individual at first glance, but he did have his shortcomings. His personality might not be everyone's cup of tea, but his ineptitude at cooking was something we could all agree on. Cooking probably isn't even the right word to describe what he *did* to food.

He put every emphasis on nutrition, and the taste suffered for it. He'd make vegetable juice by pulverizing raw vegetables without adding any fruit or flavor enhancers. He'd stew meat in nothing more than vinegar because it was healthy (apparently). Fish would be stewed with their guts and scales still present. And he'd stew berries with the skin and seeds all in to make jam because those things contained nutrients. No sugar either, in case you were wondering.

It was only possible to stretch the ingredients' original flavor so far... The memory of his meals brought a rush of bile to my throat.

"B-But, y'know... Sure, I'd rather pay a visit to the torture chamber than eat one of his meals, but it *was* nice of him to offer, what with him being him. She must be pretty special to have won him over in a matter of days."

"I'd say more than just 'pretty special.' It's an impossible challenge. Even Captain Ernst took ages to get to know him."

While mentally nodding in agreement to the knights' conversation, I pictured the lady in question. She had the appearance of a lovely noble girl who couldn't hurt a fly, but she was braver than the young knights we had here.

Just who is she? She's here with Captain Orsein, so I thought they were related, but they look nothing alike.

I was actually a member of a minor noble family, so I knew what the Orsein family's current head and his wife looked like, and Lady Mary looked nothing like either of them.

Maybe she's a distant relative? I thought, trying to explain it that way, but I still wasn't convinced. Captain Orsein didn't treat her like a sister or any other relative. Of course, that was just the way I saw it, and I knew next to nothing about the man, so I could've been wrong. But still, he treated her more politely than I'd expect for a relative.

So maybe her family's of a higher noble rank? The Orseins are only counts, I suppose. Could she be someone noble enough to have Captain Orsein as her guard?

At that point, I shook my head. I had problems with this explanation too. He *did* treat her politely, but they still seemed close.

Captain Orsein would very occasionally put on a sweet smile, and almost invariably, it would be directed at Lady Mary. It shouldn't be hard to imagine what I thought when I realized that.

The gaze he showed Lady Mary was so tender that I'd felt like I was intruding. I'd wanted to scream, "*Sorry for interrupting!*" turn around, and flee.

"So...wait... Surely not...?" I mumbled to myself, cloth still held tightly in my hand, as the word "fiancée" appeared in my mind.

C'mon, don't be silly! He's so much older than her, and they'd make a...great couple, actually.

I pictured the two of them standing side by side in my mind, and it didn't seem like such a bizarre image. In fact, it seemed like nothing could be more natural. The age gap wasn't really a huge concern either, and although I didn't know Lady Mary's age exactly, it would be even less concerning in a year or two.

"No way..."

I had nothing on which to base my supposition, but it didn't seem wrong. It was strange...but I felt like my theory might make the most sense.

Seeing me deep in thought and staring off into space, the knights tilted their heads.

“What are you mumbling about to yourself, Sergeant?” asked one.

“Have you been eating off the ground again?” asked the other.

They both laughed and continued their banter.

I glared at them. “Sod off! It’s nothing!” I chuckled the cloth at one.

“Hey, watch it!” he yelled after narrowly dodging.

However, I ignored him and left the kitchen.

I...need to go to bed and get that weird idea out of my head.

The Reincarnated Princess Takes a Break

Upon looking at my reflection in the mirror the next morning, I found dark bags beneath my eyes.

The harder I'd tried to fall asleep, the more active my brain had become, and counting sheep had done nothing for me. In the end, I hadn't managed to drift off until after it'd begun to get light outside.

It'd been a struggle to get up this morning.

The sky was so clear that the blizzard from yesterday seemed like a dream. The plan had been to set off on our investigation today, but our trip was postponed until tomorrow because there was more snow left on the ground than we'd expected.

Honestly, I felt relieved—the last thing I wanted was to pass out while traveling and become a burden on Sir Leonhart.

Just after I finished breakfast, I was informed that Captain Lieber had returned. I exited the fortress to welcome him back.

Although the skies were clear, the wind was still biting, and the chill woke up my sleep-addled brain. The snow was thirty centimeters deep, but thankfully, somebody had shoveled out a narrow, meter-wide path leading up to the fortress gate.

I saw a large cloaked figure duck his head to make his way through the gate. That had to be Captain Lieber. He was, at this moment, passing the reins of his horse to a subordinate. As he threw the thick hood of his cloak off, the snow that had settled on top fell too.

His now-visible features usually bristled with liveliness, but even from this distance, I could tell how poor his complexion looked. On top of that, his expression looked horribly stiff.

Worried, I glanced up to Sir Leonhart by my side, and he seemed just as stiff. I instinctively looked away again.

Without changing the expression on his face, Captain Lieber turned his back to us.

At that point, I finally realized that we weren't alone—there was another figure hidden in the shadows by the gate, and he had a horse in tow as well. Perhaps he was a member of the Lieber household staff who'd come in with the captain. He was wearing a hood, so I couldn't make out his face.

Captain Lieber said something to the figure, turned our way, and then finally noticed our presence. "Good morning," he said, walking over to us with a slightly embarrassed look. The bags under his eyes were as dark as my own. "Sorry for not being around yesterday. I hope nothing happened...?"

"Everything was fine, and everyone here has been great to us. More importantly, your wife—" As soon as I said the word, Captain Lieber flinched. I couldn't help but stop speaking, and I felt cold sweat trickle down my spine.

After a long, ominous silence, Captain Lieber spoke. "The truth is..."

I gulped and stared into his eyes—which looked so frighteningly serious—then waited for him to continue.

"I'm late because I'm just *too* in love with my wife."

A stupid-sounding noise escaped my throat. "Huh?!"

That was the trigger that set off an explosive laugh from Captain Lieber.

"Wait, I... Huh?"

"Forgive me, Lady Mary. You're so adorable, I couldn't help myself."

"*Ernst*," chided Sir Leonhart with a sigh.

Captain Lieber clapped his hands together in front of his face. "Sorry, sorry. Forgive me. I know, there's a time and a place, but I promise I just wanted to have a little fun."

My face was a picture of absolute bewilderment. *I don't quite get it...but I guess he was teasing me?*

Captain Lieber smiled apologetically. "Sorry! I know it was a poor way to repay your concern. But truly, you don't need to worry so much about my

wife.”

Oh, he was trying to cheer me up, I realized at last. He’d purposefully phrased it that way because I’d looked upset. That left me feeling guilty, but more than that, it made me wonder whether his wife truly *was* all right.

“Sorry for the rush, but one of my servants is waiting for me to give him some documents, so I’ll be going now.”

“Wait!” I called as he tried to leave.

“Lady Mary?”

“I know a wonderful doctor, and he’ll be moving to Nevel soon. When he does, will you let him take a look at your wife?”

Captain Lieber’s hazel eyes grew wide when he heard my desperate plea, then slowly narrowed. He smiled, but it wasn’t the cheerful grin I’d seen him wear a few times before—it was more reserved. “Thank you. The sentiment is enough.”

His gentle way of refusing my offer made it impossible to argue.

Sir Leonhart watched him leave without saying a word.

Sir Leonhart said that he planned to spend the day shoveling snow with the other knights, so I intended to go over the documents that Vice-captain Walter had given me.

I’d expected the vice-captain to act as my guard, but Captain Lieber had a backlog of paperwork to get through from his absence, so he took over the role instead.

The only noise in the quiet room was the scratching of Captain Lieber’s pen. I was trying to read the documents, but I wasn’t taking in any of it; I’d scanned the same passage over and over without internalizing the words.

I let out a sigh.

“Your Highness.”

I jumped. “Yesh?!” I covered my mouth with my hands, embarrassed by the

shrill sound I'd made. Nervously, I raised my head, and my eyes met those of Captain Lieber, who was smiling awkwardly.

"Did I startle you?"

"Just a bit." *Don't lie, Rose—he frightened the life out of you! Your head nearly hit the ceiling!*

"I'm about to take a short break," said the captain, "and it'd be nice if I could have someone to chat with."

"I don't mind, but don't you need to finish your work?" I didn't want to interfere with his duties. *I'm pretty sure he knows my head's in the clouds, so he's just trying to be nice and keep me occupied.*

Captain Lieber laughed my worries off though. "Ha ha, I can get away with taking some time out—after all, I've got plenty of excellent subordinates to pick up the slack. I got some tea as a gift, so we can sip that while we chat. I don't have any fancy snacks to go with it, but I *can* tell you a story or two about what that piece of work Leonhart was like when he was younger." He smiled, his face full of childish mischievousness.

Old stories about Sir Leonhart were too tempting a lure for me to resist... My head was nodding before my brain had a chance to think it through.

By the time I'd finished clearing my documents away, Captain Lieber had returned, carrying a tray topped with a tea set. Despite his big, muscly hands, he poured tea with grace and precision. Reddish-brown liquid now filled sixty percent of the porcelain tea cups. There was a slightly sweet fragrance, and the color was rather dark, so I imagined the leaves were similar to Assam.

He asked whether I'd like milk and sugar, and I nodded at once. *Assam's always best with milk!*

"Thank you," I said, and then I took a sip. The smell of the milk didn't overpower the rich fragrance of the tea. The sweetness and strength were *just* right, and the aftertaste was refreshing. I loved everything about it. "It's very nice. You make a good cup of tea." This wasn't just common courtesy—it was my honest opinion.

Captain Lieber bashfully scratched the back of his head. "I hope this doesn't

lower your opinion of me, but the truth is, I worked day and night to teach myself how to make tea properly to please my wife.”

“Why would that lower my opinion of you?” I asked. “I think it’s a wonderful thing to do for her!”

“Thank you. By the way, Leonhart can be quite sloppy, so he’s awful at things like this.”

“Really?” I pressed, and even *I* could tell how delighted my voice sounded.

“He *can* cook, but he’s not great at the small details and fine adjustments, so his meals turn out bland. He’s made me soup before, but the ingredients inside were too big and chunky, and the flavor was too strong. It didn’t taste horrible, but it wasn’t nice either, so I never knew what to tell him. He was the only rich kid I knew who could honestly say ‘food is to be eaten, not enjoyed’ and mean it.”

Oh, it’s dude food! I wonder if I’m a little weird for finding that cute?

“He came from a good family, he was talented, and to top it off, those looks... It’s no surprise that he was all the girls our age could think about. But he never let any of it go to his head, so the boys all liked him too.”

If I’d been born in the same generation, I would’ve definitely been a member of the Leonhart fan club. Which...is more or less what I am now, I guess.

“I did suspect that he’d probably always been popular with women,” I said.

“Yeah. But in those days, he—hmm.” Captain Lieber hesitated partway through his sentence. He’d probably judged that I shouldn’t hear what he’d been about to say.

““In my younger days, I was quite the troublemaker,”” I quoted.

The captain’s eyes grew wide.

I smiled. “He told me that himself.”

Captain Lieber blinked several times in shock. Then his eyes narrowed, as slowly as ice melts. “So he’ll actually tell you that much about himself,” he murmured with a happy look. He sounded impressed.

I would've asked him what he meant by that, but his compassionate smile vanished instantaneously and was replaced by a mischievous grin.

"Then I guess I'll let you in on all the dirty details. He wasn't a good partner to the women he was with. Obviously, I don't mean that he'd cheat on them or hit them. He's kind and considerate, and each woman he dated would smile like they were the happiest person in the world... Well, at least during the early stages of the relationship. But women are sharp, so they would always pick up on the truth before long—Leonhart's feelings of affection just never seemed to live up to his partner's."

What Captain Lieber was saying reminded me of what Sir Leonhart had told me about his fiancée—she had loved him, but there'd been a huge gap in the intensity of their feelings for one another. She'd found it excruciating, and eventually, she'd left him.

"His love has no substance. He doesn't get attached, doesn't get jealous. All the messy feelings that come with love...he doesn't get *any* of them. So when his partners float the idea of splitting to try to get a reaction out of him, he just lets them go without a fight. I wouldn't call that love. Not even close. When a man nears thirty without ever having fallen in love, it stops being funny and starts looking freaky."

I'm glad Sir Leonhart isn't around to hear this character assassination...
However, there was no trace of mockery, or derision, or anything hostile like that on Captain Lieber's face. In contrast to the scathing tone of his voice, his hazel eyes were full of concern.

"That's the sort of hassle you'll have to put up with if Leonhart von Orsein is your man," he concluded. "Do you still want him?"

I almost spit my tea out, but I managed to hold it in.

I'd suspected that Captain Lieber had pieced together some of how I felt...but I didn't realize that he had the whole puzzle figured out.

After clearing my throat to disguise my sputtering, I glanced up at him and saw that he was smiling wryly.

"You're young, beautiful, and clever. Kind too. One smile from you, and

there'd be a line of men clamoring to profess their love. And I'm sure that somewhere in that line, you'd find someone talented, considerate, and of the appropriate rank. That man would make you a lot happier than my friend with his abysmal track record...if only you'd just give up on him."

A glance at Captain Lieber's expression was enough to tell me that he wasn't warning me against wasting my time. Rather, he was questioning whether I was truly prepared to put up with Sir Leonhart long-term.

Although...it wasn't like I was his girlfriend or anything, so me being prepared made no difference; this was just a one-sided crush, and there was little chance of it ever evolving into anything else. But I'd stopped caring about that long ago.

"There's a flaw in your starting assumption," I pointed out.

"Huh?"

"I'm not looking for a husband who loves me... I'm looking to become the wife of the man I love."



Essentially, I was telling him that it *had* to be Sir Leonhart.

Captain Lieber let his jaw hang open in shock. His eyes grew as round as they could, and as they returned to normal size, a smile emerged on his lips. He clasped a hand against his forehead and muttered, “You win.” Then he let out a loud laugh. “You’re a good woman.” Winking, he added, “If I hadn’t met my wife, I might’ve fallen for you instead.”

And you’re a good man for looking out for your friend. I hope I find a way to do something for Captain Lieber and his wife. I want to be of help to them somehow.

The Reincarnated Princess Has a Scare

The next morning had dawned sunny. Because the day before had clear skies as well, most of the snow had thawed, so we were able to depart. We'd stayed overnight in a village along the way, and it was now evening of the second day of our journey.

We were drawing close to our target village.

Over the gentle decline of the path ahead, I could make out a forest in the distance. Beyond that was a craggy, snowcapped mountain range. We were barely south of the border, so that mountain range was probably inside Lapter's territory.

Upon thinking of Lapter, something entered my mind.

I glanced around to make sure nobody was nearby. There was nothing to obstruct my vision, so I was certain that we were alone. I looked back at Sir Leonhart and began to speak. "By the way, there's something else I noticed while going over the folklore. Although, it might not have any particular impact on today's trip."

The proximity to Sir Leonhart didn't make me as nervous as it had at the beginning of our journey. There was still a long way to go before I'd be comfortable with it, and my heart still beat like a drum, but at least none of my nervousness manifested visibly.

"Tell me about it."

"Walter has been investigating folktales from countries other than Nevel as well," I continued. "Obviously, there are far fewer of them compared to the ones from Nevel, but they're very intriguing."

Vice-captain Walter must've had plenty of chances to talk to travelers from Lapter because of the fortress's location on the border. He'd sorted the stories by country too, so it'd been easy to read.

"They share the same core elements as Nevel's stories, but the

interpretations are completely different.”

“They are?”

“Yes. Do you remember me telling you that most of the stories feature evil spirits? Well, in several of Nevel’s stories, the spirit forces children to inhale black flames. The children who do become ghosts that wander the forests, or get taken to the underworld... At any rate, it generally signifies death.”

“But in other countries, it signifies something else?” he asked.

“The stories are completely different. For example, in one of them, there’s an old man who travels the land in search of eternal life, and he finds the spirits at the very ends of the world. In another, a child suffers a terrible injury after falling from a cliff, and the spirit gives him the flame... So the context is all over the place, but in all of them, there’s a motif of inhaling flames. However, instead of dying, the people who inhale those flames actually get a new burst of life.”

“By that, do you mean they’re resurrected from death?”

“Hmmm,” I mused. “I’m not sure that’s the right way to describe it. Maybe you could say that it brings them back from the verge of death? They inhale the flames, and it cures their wounds.”

“That certainly is very different from our folklore. Lapter and Nevel might be distinct countries, but how can the stories change so much when they’re right next to each other?” Sir Leonhart muttered this suspiciously, his brow furrowed in thought.

I found it strange too. Our languages were practically identical, and there was much contact between our two peoples. So it was bizarre that the same story elements could take on such opposite interpretations. “It is odd. So I did some thinking, and I came up with an idea. But...I have no evidence to back this up, so take it with a pinch of salt. And when I say a pinch, I mean a *big* one.”

Sir Leonhart smiled and nodded. “Okay, let’s hear it.”

“I thought that this might be the key to understanding why Lapter is so fixated on finding the demon lord, even though he’s nothing but trouble. Maybe they think that if they can store him inside a living person, rather than a dead one,

they might be able to control him.”

After hearing my ridiculous idea, Sir Leonhart’s eyes grew wide.

“I don’t believe that’s possible,” I said. “But I do think they might believe it.”

Just as there were old books that had been kept and passed down by Nevel’s kings, perhaps there was information that was only known in Lapter... The folktales might’ve emerged from that knowledge.

However, I didn’t expect to find even a single occurrence of anyone successfully controlling the demon lord. After all, he’d nearly destroyed the world every time he’d come back. If it truly were possible to control him, then it would imply that, at least once in our past, someone had become his vessel and chosen to destroy the world of their own volition. Of course, this was all just my supposition, so it was entirely possible that I was speaking nonsense.

Sir Leonhart fell silent, apparently deep in thought. He was scowling, but then he noticed me watching him, and his expression warmed. “It’s very intriguing, but we won’t find the answers out here. Let’s put a pin in it until we’re back at the fortress.”

I was fine with that, and for the moment, I decided to focus on our search for the demon lord. As I faced forward once more, a small settlement came into view.

The sun had begun to set by the time we reached the village, so the investigation would have to wait another day. We spent the night at an inn, and the next morning, we found the sought-after building without any difficulty. We hadn’t even needed to ask around.

Just as Vice-captain Walter’s information had claimed, the temple was on the outskirts of the village with the woods at its back. It was in a rougher state than I’d expected, and there was hardly anything left of the roof. Part of one wall had collapsed as well, so there was a thick layer of leaves on the floor.

If this is the right place, then Michael would’ve had to spend a night here... But there’s no shelter from the wind or the rain.

I could tell from the outside that there was no hidden room in the back. That just left the cellar...which wouldn't be easy to search.

"I'll take a look inside first, and you can come in after. Don't get too close to the walls."

Sir Leonhart stepped toward the temple, but he came to a stop at the entrance. He pulled me behind himself and peered inside.

"Someone has been here recently..." he murmured.

"What?"

"And it appears that they were looking for something."

Hearing that, I grew pale. If they were searching for anything, it was surely the demon lord.

"Stay close to me," Sir Leonhart whispered, unsheathing his sword.

We cautiously stepped inside, and it was dark, despite the absence of one half of the roof. There was a nasty, musty smell in the air.

My eyes gradually adjusted to the dark, and I began to make out the inside of the room. The bulky stone pillars and the walls with carved reliefs had been blackened by contact with the elements. There were two sculptures in the back of the room, spaced out on either side—the right one had fallen apart, leaving only its plinth still standing, and the one on the left was only barely recognizable as a humanoid figure. Fragments of the collapsed ceiling were buried and interspersed among the leaves and mud on the floor.

But, as Sir Leonhart had said, there were clear signs that things had been touched. Somebody had sifted through the leaves and moved the rubble. There was indeed evidence that someone had been desperately searching for a hidden room...just like we were.

"Who would..." I started, muttering to myself, but there was only one answer I could think of.

"It's not impossible that this is the work of thieves," stated Sir Leonhart. "Although it is remarkably unlikely."

The room was in an awful state. Anything of value would've been taken or

broken long ago. It seemed doubtful that any thief would go to the trouble of rifling through the rubble here.

There had to be someone from Lapter—someone who had similar intel as me—and they were one step ahead of us. That was just conjecture, but the thought alone was terrifying enough to send a chill down my spine.

I just stood there, but Sir Leonhart sheathed his sword and patted me on the back. “We might as well take a look around.” He began to examine the temple.

However, we didn’t find anything that seemed like a door to a hidden room. We knocked on the ground and listened for hollow cavities, but to no avail. In the end, we had to accept that we weren’t in the right place.

As soon as we exited the temple, a voice jumped out at us.

“What were you doin’ in there?”

An old man carrying a bundle of firewood on his back, probably a villager, glared sharply at Sir Leonhart. But the moment he noticed me behind Sir Leonhart, his demeanor calmed.

Just to be on the safe side, I recycled the same story we’d used so far—I was a girl who liked old buildings, and I’d begged my older brother to take me to one.

“Sorry ’bout that,” apologized the old man. “I thought strange folk had turned up again.”

“Bandits? Do you see many here?”

“Oh no, not bandits,” the old man said, smiling awkwardly. “They don’t steal nothin’. We’ve just been seein’ suspicious characters ’round here lately, that’s all. They don’t cause no harm...but it’s creepy, ya know?”

I nodded along to the old man, but I couldn’t concentrate on what he was saying. *So this temple has already been thoroughly searched? They are one step ahead of us.*

My suspicion was growing into certainty.

We left the village behind us as soon as we parted ways with the old man.

Only one village remained of our three candidates.

If we wasted any time now, we'd be too late.

Sir Leonhart warned me that the ride ahead would be tough, and I gave a firm, silent nod. The previous journey had taken a day and a half, but we raced across the same distance in half that time. We did squeeze a few breaks in, but we spent almost all of our time on horseback.

My confidence in my ears' semicircular canals began to waver as motion sickness set in. I'd thought that I'd built up some muscle strength over my many travels...but I was sorely mistaken about that. It took all my strength just to cling to the horse without getting thrown off.

By the time we made it to the last village, everything was shrouded in darkness.

I was barely clinging to life, and I had to let Sir Leonhart help me down from the horse. *Sorry. This would go much more smoothly without me, I know.*

Instead of going straight to the temple, Sir Leonhart took me to an inn. From his perspective, it probably would've been too dangerous to let me go to the temple with him when I was this out of action—I was unable to even walk without him holding me up.

Sir Leonhart placed me down on the bed in a sitting position and kneeled in front of me. "I can go check the temple out on my own. I'll return in about an hour. I want you to promise me that you won't take a single step outside of this inn."

He wasn't taking no for an answer, so I nodded feebly.

I knew that my presence would make everything more dangerous, but that didn't make me any less worried about him. I felt a squeezing pain in my heart when I imagined him walking out there, alone and in the dark.

My head dropped, my face scrunched up. Seeing that, Sir Leonhart smiled sadly. He placed his large hand on my head. "Don't worry. I promise that I won't do anything dangerous."

I crumpled my skirt in my fists and forced my lips apart. "Okay. Be careful." I

tried to smile as I said this, but I doubt I succeeded. If I had, Sir Leonhart wouldn't have made such a troubled face.

"Get some rest while I'm gone... Go to sleep if you want." As caring as ever, Sir Leonhart was more concerned about me than he was himself.

I crawled into bed after watching him leave, though I wasn't in the mood for rest. My entire body was exhausted, but closing my eyes didn't bring sleep any closer. I climbed back down from the bed and paced around the room aimlessly. Then I walked over to the window and gently opened the wooden shutters.

Ice-cold wind blew into the room, chilling the skin on my neck. I looked down from the window, but it was too dark to make out much of anything. Flickers of light were shining through the gaps in the windows of nearby houses, and plumes of smoke rose from the chimneys, but I couldn't see much else. I had no idea where the temple—or Sir Leonhart—could be.

Concern turned to fear and began to drive all other thoughts from my mind. My fingers gripped the windowsill so tightly that the wood began to creak.

I'm so scared. Why is waiting so terrifying?

I knew this feeling... I'd felt it when Lutz and Teo had been abducted and when I'd waited for Klaus to return while he'd been fighting pirates. But I could never get used to it. The passage of time seemed so bizarrely slow, and every second, I was tormented by how powerless I was, and how I was unable to do anything but wait.

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something shift...just a flicker of movement. I flung my head outside the window and strained my eyes to get a better look, but I couldn't make anything out in the darkness.

For a moment, I thought that Sir Leonhart had returned, but that would've been impossible. I knew for certain that he'd borrowed a lantern from the innkeeper, using the cover story that he'd lost something outside.

Maybe it was just an animal, like a dog or a cat. But maybe...it's Lapter's spy. My heart beat painfully in my chest at the thought.

I closed the shutters and leaped toward the door. I grabbed the doorknob with one hand, but then I placed my other hand on top of the first, stopping

myself.

Come on, Rose. He told you to wait. What do you think's gonna happen if you chase after him? Are you gonna knock out the bad guys? No! You can't even protect yourself, so you would just be putting Sir Leonhart in more danger.

The best thing for me to do is to just trust him and wait here.

"It's okay... It's okay..." I croaked to myself, sucking in air through my teeth. He's strong. He won't lose to anyone. He'll come back to me. "It's—"

Before I could finish my mantra, there was a sudden knock at the door.

It was a gentle knock, the sort used in case an occupant was sleeping. "Are you awa—" a voice called, but I didn't wait for him to finish.

I threw the door open, jumping through so quickly that I almost tumbled over.

Sir Leonhart was there, looking at me with wide-open eyes.

"Mary?" he asked with confusion.

He seemed okay though. I couldn't see any injuries.

Relief spread throughout my body all at once, and all my strength left me. Glancing over at the clock, I realized that an hour had passed since Sir Leonhart had left. My knees went weak and I began to collapse.

"Mary!" Sir Leonhart wrapped his arms around me to stop my fall. He gazed at my face for signs of ill health, but I shook my head.

"I'm fine. I was just so relieved to see you that my strength gave out."

I heard him gasp and felt the grip of his arms tighten. "I'm sorry. You were worried, weren't you?"

"It's okay." I smiled broadly. "Everything's fine now that you're back, safe and sound."

Sir Leonhart put on an awkward smile of his own in return.

"So, ummm...how did it go?" I asked.

"Oh, right." Sir Leonhart shut the door and slowly brought me to my feet. He led me over to the bed and let me sit on the edge of it.

This wasn't a fancy inn, so there were no tables or chairs, and Sir Leonhart had to stand.

After a moment's hesitation, he made eye contact with me. "Long story short, it wasn't there."

A short, sharp gasp escaped my throat. My heart rate began to spike as though I'd started to run, and sweat prickled at my palms. "Do you mean...there's evidence that someone else has taken it?"

My mouth was dry with nerves, and it was a struggle to speak properly. I began to shiver, my head filled with the worst possible outcome. *Why wasn't I in more of a hurry? Why didn't I recognize how dangerous this mission is? "We didn't make it in time" just isn't a good enough excuse! Not when the fate of the world and all the people in it are at stake!*

Despair threatened to dye my heart black, but Sir Leonhart burned out the darkness with one clear, loud word: "No."

After a moment, he continued. "There was no evidence of that."

"So... Why then?"

"There was no hidden room at all."

"What?!" I blurted, gobsmacked.

No hidden room? So this isn't the right place either?! We've checked all three of the villages that met the conditions, so there is nowhere else on our list. Are we back at square one after all we've been through? That's beyond a joke!

"I did find evidence of someone searching for something in this temple as well...and very recently."

"How can you be so sure it was recent?"

"There was some snow left around the temple, so I could see their footprints. Also, there was a faint smell of oil in the air from where they must've used a torch or lantern during their search."

That settles it. There's someone out there looking for the same thing as us. And there's a high probability that they're working from the same intel as I am. "How could they have the same information? Do you think there are records in

Lapter of where the demon lord was sealed?”

Sir Leonhart didn't answer my questions. It didn't seem like he was ignoring me, more that he was too deep in thought to register my voice.

“Sir Leon?”

“Ah! Sorry. I was just thinking about something.”

What could he have been thinking about to turn his expression so fierce?

I would learn the answer to that question, but not for some time.

I woke up early the next morning so that I could take a look at the temple before our return to the fortress. I rummaged throughout the building, but Sir Leonhart was right—there was no trapdoor and no space likely to hold a hidden room. I couldn't find any loose, movable spots on the thick pillars or the patterned floor, and the statues in the middle, left, and right of the room didn't appear to be gimmicked either.

“For the time being, let's go back to the fortress,” I relented. “I'd like to run my eyes over the documents again.”

Fumbling around blindly wouldn't give us any clues. Nevel was a vast country, so we couldn't just hope to stumble onto the right place by accident.

After agreeing to my suggestion, Sir Leonhart proposed that we get something to eat first. He was probably concerned about me, and so I didn't think it would be right to refuse him. I nodded.

The only place that served food in the village was relatively busy. I slipped past the hurrying travelers who were departing and made my way inside.

But then I froze. I'd recognized someone.

Seeing me, his eyes grew wide. “We meet again!” he chirped with a friendly smile.

Ratte.

This was the young man who'd been working in the first village we'd traveled to, and he was also a character from the game *Welcome to the Hidden World*.

His presence here freaked me out.

Why's he here?! The figure I'd glimpsed the night before played on my mind, and I was beginning to suspect the worst. *So Ratte really is on Lapter's side...?*

Something gently nudged my back. My thoughts were brought back to the real world, and at the same time, Sir Leonhart stepped forward. He managed to avoid looking terribly flustered...unlike me.

He walked over to Ratte. "What a coincidence," he said, feigning innocence perfectly.

"Yeah, wow, such a surprise!" continued Ratte gleefully. He then pointed to the seats on the opposite side of his table. "Ah! Come sit with me."

I took a seat and tried to act normal, although my composure was more wooden than Sir Leonhart's. Ratte had already finished his meal, and there was a stack of empty dishes and cutlery on the table.

Ratte raised his hand and called to a waitress. "Excuse me, miss! Could you take our orders?" He proceeded to ask for another drink.

Sir Leonhart ordered meals for two.

"I thought you might wind up here," said Ratte. "After all, you did say you like old buildings. I'm glad we didn't miss each other."

"I am as well," replied Sir Leonhart. "Are you here to pick up stock for your restaurant?"

"No, it's my day off."

Food arrived, but the taste didn't register on my tongue. I repeated the simple motions of chewing and swallowing as though they were my job.

I was lucky that Sir Leonhart was here to keep a normal conversation going. If I'd been by myself, this lunch date would've turned extremely uncomfortable.

"There was a spot I wanted to check out, so I came all the way out here."

"It sounds like you didn't find that spot," remarked Sir Leonhart.

"Well, I guess it wasn't what I was hoping for."

I gasped as I was swallowing soup, causing me to nearly choke. I made a

pretty weird noise, but I managed not to spit the soup out, which deserved praise.

Should I take him at his word? That he didn't find what he was hoping to, i.e., the stone sealing away the demon lord...? Or am I reading too deeply into it?

"What about you, miss?"

Suddenly an active participant in the conversation, I instinctively flung my head up. "Huh?!"

Ratte was resting his chin in his hands and looking into my eyes. The smile on his face was gone, and his handsome looks made the sight all the more intimidating. "Did you get to see what you wanted to?"

I almost dropped my spoon, so I gripped its handle tightly. *Calm down*, I recited mentally. *Calm down*. I smiled at him. "No, unfortunately, I didn't either. It wasn't what I'd imagined."

Ratte nodded and narrowed his eyes. "Ah, so that's you and me both." He looked away from me toward one of the waitstaff and ordered a refill of his drink.

While exhaling softly, I placed a hand on my chest and felt the rapid drumbeat of my heart.

"Now that we've eaten, we should get going," suggested Sir Leonhart.

"Oh, er, yeah. Sure, brother." I stood up.

"See you later," said Ratte, waving his hand as he watched us leave.

I suppose you will...but I doubt the conversation will go as calmly next time.

My mind was in turmoil as I left the restaurant.

We quickly left the village and headed back to the fortress. All the knights were shocked to see how much of a rush we were in.

After dinner, we summoned Captain Lieber, and the three of us gathered around a desk with a map spread out on top. The silence was stifling—the only noise was the intermittent rattle of the window glass being battered by the

north wind.

Captain Lieber was the first to break the silence. He crossed his arms and scowled at the map. “None of the three villages were the right one?”

“No. They were all dead ends,” Sir Leonhart replied bluntly.

“That shouldn’t be...” murmured Captain Lieber, violently scratching his head. “Those three are the only villages on the border with a dilapidated temple on their outskirts. We’ve checked every village while we’ve been marching, and the information Isaac collects as a hobby confirms as much.”

I very much doubt that the border defense force would miss an entire village...so which part of our criteria do we need to reexamine? “Should we loosen the restriction that the village has to be on the border?” I suggested.

“To expand our search range?” asked Sir Leonhart. “That might work, but it would take too long to gather all the necessary information.”

Sir Leonhart was completely right. Expanding the search range increased the chances of picking up the right village, but it also increased in equal measure the time it would take to investigate. It would be grueling work for the border defense force, and I wouldn’t know what to say to them if it turned out to be for nothing. Also, Lapter was on the hunt for the same thing as us, so we didn’t have the time to wait around for another year. I decided that this would be our last resort in case all other plans failed.

“How about this?” started Captain Lieber. “We relax the restriction of a dilapidated temple and just check all the villages with a temple near the border.”

“Is that possible?” asked Sir Leonhart.

“Yeah...sort of. I’d be relying on my memory, so it wouldn’t be perfect.”

Sir Leonhart and Captain Lieber both turned to me.

The demon lord is inside, so it’s got to be an old temple. But maybe the reason it was falling apart in the game was because of the war—since the fighting was averted in this world, the structure could still be in good condition. It’s definitely worth a shot.

“Let’s go ahead with that,” I agreed.

Captain Lieber accepted at once. “Leave it to me.”

We’d be remaining inside the fortress for a time while the captain looked into it. I hated not knowing what Lapter was after, and I just wanted to get on with it...but there was nothing I could do.

I stared blankly at the unfamiliar ceiling. For a moment, I had no idea where I was, but it gradually came back to me.

That’s right, I’m back at the fortress.

I’d been worried about whether I’d be able to fall asleep, but I had no memories of anything that had happened after climbing into bed. My body had probably been at its limit. Thanks to a good night’s sleep, my head was now feeling a lot clearer.

I jumped down from the bed, and the cool floor chilled my feet. I threw on a shawl and walked over to the window. Through a crack in the curtains, I could see that the eastern sky was dotted with white clouds.

The weather’s looking nice for today.

After warming my fingers with my breath, I got dressed quickly. I walked back to the curtains and threw them open, then sat on the sofa with my shawl and a lap blanket. Now that I was all wrapped up and warm, I pulled over the documents I’d borrowed from Vice-captain Walter. I wanted to find a clue, no matter how small.

Rifling through the collection of stories about evil spirits that I’d previously set aside, I pulled out one bundle of papers. I turned past the front page, which detailed the title, place names, and the date of compilation, then scanned the neat handwriting.

This was the story of a carefree shepherd boy, and it began with a familiar opener.

“Once upon a time.”

The boy loved midday naps more than life itself, and on the day of this story, he was seeking what he desired most: to catch a few winks in the drowsy afternoon. Shirking work, the boy sneaked away from his parents and started looking for a nice spot to fall asleep.

As the boy sought out a comfy spot to nap, he wandered all over, checking a nearby open field, the branch of a great tree behind his home, and the attic of his sheep hut. Finally, the boy spied a suitable bale of hay and jumped inside. When he did, a small orb of light floated out, circling above. At first, he thought it was just dust, but then the light began to whirl around him.

The light was nice and warm and bright, and the boy thought he'd have a pleasant time sleeping with it near him, so he chased after it. However, the light kept moving, maintaining a fixed distance from his grasp. It moved slowly enough that he wouldn't lose sight of it, but quickly enough to always be just out of reach.

Chasing the light was all the boy could think about until he arrived at the mouth of the woods. There, he at last regained his senses. It was only after turning around that he realized how far he'd come from home, and how dark it was. His parents had told him many times never to enter the forest.

Panic set in, and the boy set off for his home. But then, the light that had always been just out of reach danced over to his side. It was inviting him into the forest, and the boy wasn't sure which path to choose.

I'm nearly there, the boy thought. A little more, and I can reach the orb. Then, when I've got it, I just know I'll have the best sleep...

Telling himself that the light would be within his grasp soon enough, the boy entered the nighttime forest. He chased after the light, which flickered and danced only a hair's breadth away from his fingertips.

Deeper and deeper into the woods he went, until finally, he came upon an old temple.

I shoved my head down toward the book. "A temple! There's a temple in this one!" I excitedly turned the page.

The boy chased the light inside the temple. He ventured toward the back, unsettled by the brief, eerie glimpses of statues as the light passed them by.

At that point, the orb of light burst open and took on the form of a person. It was a beautiful girl, one with scarlet eyes and hair so red that it could've been woven from flames. She smiled at him, and he was captivated by her beauty.

Then, she beckoned him.

The boy shuffled over, drawn to her, and she held out both hands. In the left was a small flame, and in the right was nothing.

She said, "If you swallow the flame in my left hand, you will have a peaceful slumber."

"And your other hand?" the boy asked. "I don't see anything in your right hand. What's there?"

"Nothing's there," the girl answered. "But if you choose the right, I'll take you back to the mouth of the forest at once."

The boy couldn't choose. It was a very difficult decision. If he went home now, his parents would surely be mad at him. He'd sneaked away from work and come into the forest, so he could give up on the chance to nap again any time soon. Though he'd rather they didn't get mad at him, even more than that, he couldn't bear the idea of not being able to doze off.

After a lot of thought, the boy chose the flames. He planned to apologize to his parents the next day...after he'd enjoyed his nap.

But, after swallowing the flames, the boy would never rise again.

And the next day, something that looked like the boy returned to his parents.

It worked hard and never sneaked off for a nap. It worked through the night as well.

The parents grew concerned and told It to sleep, but It laughed at them.

"I've had a lifetime's worth of sleep already," It said.

I closed the book and heaved a sigh. “The same ending as all the rest.”

It was a bad end. Had it been a game, I would’ve wondered what wrong path I’d taken to end up with that route. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find anything new or insightful in this story.

I got some breakfast and then continued to spend time in my room.

Sir Leonhart had said that he wanted to check something out today, so Captain Lieber had assigned a different knight to guard me. This knight was waiting on the other side of the door to give me privacy. I was, after all, a noble girl from a posh family... At least, that’s what he’d been told.

I spent several hours thumbing through the documents in silence. At one point, I stopped what I was doing and glanced outside the window. The sun was high in the sky—it would probably be midday soon, and I had a headache from reading the tiny handwriting. I massaged the corners of my eyes with my thumbs, then raised my arms above my head and yawned.

I’d been having trouble getting my thinking straight, but that wasn’t because of the dull, pounding headache in my temporal lobe. No, there was something I was overlooking.

“What could it be?”

I’d felt like something was wrong for some time. It was a distracting feeling, like having a tiny bone stuck in my throat. *I know I’m missing something, but I have no idea what it is.* I sank into the backrest and shut my eyes.

In my mind, I conjured up a visual retelling of the story I’d read earlier. The opening probably wasn’t important, so I started from when the boy entered the forest.

A little boy walked through the forest at night, chasing after a small light. He fumbled his way through the forest haphazardly, tripping on tree roots, getting stuck in the mud. At last, he caught a glimpse of a building through the dense thicket of trees. It was an old temple, half shrouded in the green coverage of vines and moss. The light zipped away inside.

The boy hesitated, crept out by the darkness he could spy through the cracks in the temple’s pillars. But he was too scared to turn back without the

light, so he went inside.

The temple's interior was very dark, and the faces of the statues that showed occasionally in the dim, flickering light were unsettling. His shadow, stretched out long before him, looked like a monster. The boy grew even more scared.

"I found the temple a little scary as well because of how dark it was... No wonder the kid's frightened." *It's always scary seeing humanlike figures in the darkness, like Japanese dolls or mannequins. The temple statues probably give off a different vibe than they would in the daylight.*

"Hmm?"

Something was odd.

Once more, I conjured memories of the temples I'd seen. I imagined each of the three I'd been to in order.

They'd been in various states of repair: one freshly rebuilt, the others crumbling. However, the interior designs had been pretty much the same...except for one of them. The temple in the first village—the one being rebuilt—hadn't housed any statues. For a moment, I wondered whether that was because it was still under construction...but that couldn't have been right. The old man had told me that they'd been surprised by how little had been inside the old one.

Maybe he just wasn't counting the statues? Like, maybe he was implying that there'd been no paintings or books, no things of value...?

"But in that case...you'd put the statues back in the new temple, right?"

If there'd been old statues inside, they probably wouldn't have destroyed them when they'd demolished the rest of the building. And if they'd already been broken, they would've been rebuilt, just like the temple itself. Or maybe the villagers had planned to build statues after construction was complete...?

"Hmmm." I thought some more.

I might be overthinking this, but...I've got the idea in my head now, and I can't shake it. Hypothetically, what if the temple they tore down was a fake—a sham—designed to distract attention away from the real temple that houses the

demon lord?

“Then the real temple’s in the woods...?” I mumbled, picturing the village’s layout in the back of my mind. There’d been a forest right next to the settlement. Maybe that was where the temple was located.

This was just a hunch, and I had no evidence or proof.

But if I didn’t act on it, I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about it—returning to check it out would be the quickest way to get the thought out of my mind.

“All right then!”

Placing the documents on the desk, I stood up and went outside. There, I asked the guard posted by the door to take me to Captain Lieber’s office.

The Reincarnated Princess Has a Suspicion

When I arrived outside the captain's office, it was Sir Leonhart who came out to greet me. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"I've thought of something, and I want to discuss it..."

"Okay, come on inside." He invited me into the office. Only Sir Leonhart and Captain Lieber were inside. I ordered my guard to wait outside, although I did feel guilty making him just stand out there.

Captain Lieber made room on the sofa by shoving some documents aside, and he gestured for me to sit. I perched myself on the edge of the cushion.

Maps and documents were still open on the desk, and both men had dark bags beneath their eyes. They'd probably been researching here all night.

"What did you want to tell us about?" Sir Leonhart asked.

I gulped. "I want to go back to the first village."

"The first one?" Sir Leonhart knitted his brow, confused.

"I thought the temple in the first village was being rebuilt?" asked Captain Lieber.

"You're correct. The villagers knocked down the old temple and are currently building a new one in its place. But one of the villagers told us that the temple had always been empty."

"Well, maybe nothing valuable enough to put back in the new temple actually survived," Captain Lieber reasoned. "Do you think that's what they meant?"

"It's possible, but if anything inside had been destroyed, I don't think he would've said that the temple was 'empty.' And I doubt bandits could've taken everything either. Statues are too heavy to move."

"I see..." Captain Lieber crossed his arms and hummed in thought.

"So I did a little thinking...and I came up with an idea, although I don't have

any evidence to back it up.”

I was tiptoeing around the point, so Sir Leonhart urged me on. “Let’s hear it.”

“Maybe there’s another temple *in addition to* the one that’s being rebuilt, and that’s where they keep all their objects of faith.”

“So the reason the temple we visited was empty was because it was only there to serve as a distraction?” Sir Leonhart instantly reached the conclusion that my nonsensical explanation had been aiming for. His powers of comprehension were outstanding. “So we should have a look in the woods near that village.”

I nodded. “Yes. And I’d like to get there as quickly as possible.” *Otherwise, Lapter might beat us to it.* Although I didn’t say that out loud, Sir Leonhart knew what I was thinking.

“I’ll begin our preparations to leave at once,” Sir Leonhart declared, standing up, but Captain Lieber stopped him.

“Hey, just hold on! If you leave now it’ll be dark by the time you get there. Wait for tomorrow!”

“We must act now.”

“Argh... Okay, well, wait a minute at least! I’ll come too.”

Captain Lieber’s sudden offer caught me by surprise.

“You?! But...”

“I know just how well Leonhart can handle himself, but even so, I don’t like the idea of Your Highness being in the dark with only one guard. And I won’t bring any of my men because we’ll be too noticeable if we travel in a large group.” After he’d finished speaking, Captain Lieber swept from the room in a rush. He’d probably gone to give his subordinates orders.

A little under an hour later, all three of us convened near the fortress gate and left for the village.

The horses’ hooves pounded the ground, kicking up great clouds of dust.

Through the misty sky, I could see the sun sitting just above the horizon. Soon, it would be dusk.

“Are you all right, Princess?” asked Sir Leonhart, gazing into my eyes. “We’ll be there shortly, so hang in there.”

I nodded my head several times. Though I would’ve liked to answer him properly, I didn’t want to accidentally bite my tongue.

I fought to raise my head against the pull of the wind. The village was beginning to come into view in the distance, and the woods were behind it. We’d look pretty conspicuous if we charged right through the village, so we circled around, maintaining a large distance from the settlement.

I glanced sidelong at the village as we passed. Plumes of smoke rose from chimneys, and flocks of sheep were returning to their pens. Birds chirped as they soared overhead in formation, and I could hear the delightful sound of children playing. I saw normality, and I wanted nothing to ever disturb it.

By the time we’d made it to the woods from the side, the sun had almost completely set.

“Can you climb down?” asked Sir Leonhart, holding out his hand.

Taking it, I slid off the horse. I stumbled, but with Sir Leonhart’s assistance, I managed to steady myself and stand up. It felt like the earth was wobbling beneath me, which made me nauseous.

“Don’t push yourself, Princess,” urged Sir Leonhart, peering into my eyes with concern.

“I’m fine,” I said, managing to smile.

“Didn’t make it before sundown after all,” said Captain Lieber. Striking two flints together, he deftly lit a torch. With the flickering flames, it became possible to make out the trees in the nighttime woods.

The breeze blew through the leaves on their branches, and their concordant rustling sounded like whispering. To me, it seemed as though the twisting shadows of the swaying trees had converged into one giant monster, and my knees went weak. The woods at night were creepy enough to keep people

away, even without resorting to frightening folklore. The sight was so intimidating... It seemed *right* that the demon lord should be found in a place like this.

I clenched my trembling fists and drew a slow, deep breath. *It's okay. I'm not on my own. I've got two incredibly strong guards by my side.*

"Let's go," Sir Leonhart said.

"Okay," I agreed, and with that, we entered the woods.

Captain Lieber was walking out front, I was behind him, and Sir Leonhart had the rear.

I'd felt cold on the horse with the wind blowing against me, but the woods were a different kind of cold. The air here was icy and slightly humid.

So cold. When I exhaled, my breath warmed my nose for a second, but then it fogged up and turned so cold that it hurt. I was worried I'd lose my ears and nose to frostbite. The cool air around my body was sapping the heat from my skin. Even with gloves on, my fingertips were going numb.

If we don't find the temple soon, I'll freeze to death. Although there's no guarantee it actually exists.

As we were heading deeper into the woods, I looked around, and something flashed in my peripheral vision. I gasped and stopped moving.

Noticing that, Sir Leonhart asked, "What's wrong?"

"I think I saw a flash of light there," I said, pointing.

Captain Lieber illuminated the spot I'd pointed to with his torch. After taking a long look at the boulder there, he nodded and turned back to me. "Ah, okay, just moss. It's the kind that reflects light."

Nervously, I examined it myself and realized that it was reflecting the thin glimmers of moonlight that had seeped through the canopy. I let out a sigh of relief.

For a second there I thought the spirits really existed...

If a young child had come into the forest and seen the same thing, it would've

scared them into running away. That's quite cool—the folklore incorporates elements of nature into its narratives.

Now isn't the time to be admiring that fact though, I thought, refocusing on our mission.

“At the moment, we’re heading toward the center of the woods, but do you have any idea about the specific location?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Thought not... Are you sure we shouldn’t wait for the sun to come up?” Captain Lieber’s concern was entirely justified.

However, I felt an inexplicable need for urgency, and I just couldn’t sit around waiting. I hoped it was just me overreacting, but I was on edge. “I want to keep looking for a little bit longer.”

Captain Lieber relented. “Okay. However, we’ll stop after one more hour.”

“An *hour*?”

“Any longer than that and you’ll turn into an ice pop,” warned Captain Lieber. “Your nose is bright red, you know?”

I hurriedly covered my nose. *So embarrassing! Sure, red-nosed reindeer are cute, but red-nosed me looks like an idiot!*

“Princess,” called Sir Leonhart from behind me.

I swiveled around with my hands still on my nose, making my pose seem quite unnatural...but I was a girl in love, and I didn’t want my crush to see me looking like an idiot. For that, I should be afforded some understanding.

When I raised my head, Sir Leonhart’s face was so close to mine that I jumped. He passed his hand behind my head and wrapped something around my neck.

It was a piece of cloth that he’d been using like a scarf to keep warm. “I hope this makes the cold a little more bearable,” he said bashfully.

Unable to process what had just happened, I stood frozen with my hands on the scarf.

Oh my god, this is right out of a shojo manga! I never thought it'd happen to me! Is this real life, or am I dreaming? Maybe I passed out from the cold.

I nestled the lower half of my face into the scarf, and it smelled of him, so I almost fainted. *Oh God, I'm gonna get a nosebleed.*

"Save the romance for later, we're in a rush," sighed Captain Lieber with a look of exasperation.

"Ro—?!" My mouth opened and closed like a carp.

"There's no need to get so emba— Watch out!!!"

The look on Captain Lieber's face turned serious in an instant. He grabbed my arm and pulled me toward his chest.

Wrapped up in his arms, I saw something zip past at high speed. A thin knife was sticking out from the carpet of dead leaves, its blade gleaming dully in the torchlight.

Sir Leonhart had leaped back, and he drew his sword. He deftly knocked down a second knife that came whizzing through the air. There followed a series of metallic clashing sounds, and I quickly realized that the knives were coming from different directions...which meant there were multiple assailants.

Are we surrounded? I thought, a chill running down my spine. It was too dark to be able to see our enemies. My imagination swelled to fill the gaps, placing foes on all sides. The terrifying prospect that my own death was drawing near caused my body to tremble.

"Ernst, go on ahead!" yelled Sir Leonhart.

After a moment's hesitation, Captain Lieber picked me up and started running.

"S-Sir Leon!!!" I cried, leaning as far as I could toward him, reaching my hand out.

"I'll catch up!" he yelled back, and then I lost sight of the man I held so dear.

Darkness engulfed him.

"Sir Leon...!"

The level of fear I'd felt a moment ago was nothing compared to this. My heart hurt like someone was crushing it. A dry rasp escaped from the back of my throat.

Still being carried over Captain Lieber's shoulders, I stared into the gloom. However hard I squinted, I still couldn't make out our foes or Sir Leonhart. All I could see were the flames of the torch, swaying in step with the captain's running pace, and the foliage illuminated by its light.

Sir Leonhart is strong, so he'll be okay, I told myself, but I was so very frightened.

Captain Lieber inspected our surroundings and then set me down. "Looks like there are no bad guys up here."

I took one step back the way we'd come, but then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to find Captain Lieber gazing down at me in silence.

I pulled Sir Leonhart's scarf up around my nose and gripped the fabric tightly. I knew that I'd do more harm than good by going back. Logically, I understood that, but my body was more honest about my emotions, and it screamed at me to sprint away, to return to him.

I shut my eyes and slapped my cheeks with both hands. *Pull it together, Rosemary! Lapter's agents are right on our heels, so this isn't the time to be moping! You know what you need to do!* "Let's...go."

Captain Lieber seemed to have something he wanted to say, but after hesitating for a moment, he nodded. "Okay."

The two of us set off once more for the heart of the woods.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been walking. I'd just been putting one foot in front of the other mindlessly, saying nothing, carrying on forward, so it was hard to sense the passage of time. I was cold and tired, and all I could think about was how worried I was about Sir Leonhart, which is probably why I didn't notice it until it was right in front of me.

"Stop!" cried Captain Lieber.

Startled, I flung my head up. I was immediately face-to-face with Captain Lieber's back, and then I saw a black shadow swaying in front of me. At first, I thought it was one of our foes, and I prepared myself to run.

However, I soon realized that I was mistaken. The black shadow belonged not to a person, but a tree, and its silhouette was cast onto a wall by the torchlight.

My jaw dropped in shock as I looked at the dirty white wall. I was standing before an old building. It was too dark to make out the entire structure, but it seemed like the sort of building one might call a temple.

"It's really here..."

Far from feeling joy about my correct hypothesis, I was confused. While it had been my own theory, even I hadn't truly thought it was accurate.

"This far inside the woods... It really is surprising."

Captain Lieber held the torch aloft, illuminating the dim outlines of the thick, vine-covered pillars and the walls, which were white with a dirty, moss-green tinge. The silhouette that emerged in the dim light was creepy—it seemed more like a title screen from a horror game than a religious structure.

"Let's go inside, Your Highness."

"Y-Yes."

I'd been overwhelmed by the intensity of the sight until Captain Lieber's voice snapped me out of it.

We climbed the stone steps at the front of the structure and reached a large set of double doors. They stood at least twice as tall as me, around three meters high. Captain Lieber laid his hands on the intricate vine-engraved wood. There were no handles, so he pushed, but the doors wouldn't budge. The metal creaked, and a slight opening did appear, but nothing more. Next, he put his fingers through the gap and tried to pull, but this didn't work either. The temple must've been locked from the inside.

Captain Lieber kept trying for a while, but then he let out a sigh and turned to me. "Could you hang on to the torch for a second?" he asked, holding it out to me.

“Sure.” I took the torch with both hands.

“Stand back a bit.”

“Um...okay?” I did as I was told, taking a step away with the torch still in my grasp.

Then, Captain Lieber kicked the door with all his strength. His brash actions left me wide-eyed in surprise. However...

The doors crashed open.

I heard the clatter of something bouncing along the floor—it was a broken fragment of wood, probably the bar that had been holding the door closed from inside. The lock must’ve rotted over the years, and it had splintered into pieces now, but the door itself was fine.

“Sorry about that,” I whispered under my breath to nobody in particular.

Musty air spilled out from inside. Covering my nose and mouth with a hand, I peeked into the dark interior.

I heard my footfall echo as soon as I took a step. Captain Lieber grabbed the torch back from me and gestured with his eyes for us to go inside.

Dust covered the floor, proof that we were the first intruders in a long time, and I left distinct footprints behind as I walked. Cobwebs even covered the grimy relief on the wall. Although the temple did seem quite old, its structure was more intact than I’d imagined it would be; the roof was in one piece, and the walls were still standing.

It was in a much worse state in the game...so maybe this isn’t the right place...? It could be that it’s still in good condition because the war was averted. After all, the front lines were nearby when Michael visited the village during Hidden World. Maybe if the war had happened, then the woods would’ve burned down and this temple would’ve been damaged.

I was peering all around the inside of the temple when Captain Lieber said, “Stay close to me, Your Highness.”

“O-Okay!” I scurried after him.

Toward the back was a flight of stairs, and at the top, there were two large

statues positioned on either side of the landing. Behind them was a painting that covered the entirety of the wall.

“Wow...” Is that a fresco?

It depicted a beautiful goddess with a halo, and she was facing a black flame, which probably represented the demon lord.

“Let’s check the walls and the floor,” said Captain Lieber.

“Okay.”

We began to inspect the inside of the building. Groping around the wall with our hands, we started from one end and worked our way across. My fingertips turned a filthy black immediately. I wasn’t enthralled by the idea of searching the dusty floor with my hands, so I used my shoes to check it with each step I took.

As we made our way counterclockwise from the eastern side, it wasn’t long before we found a door. It was a wooden door, smaller and less elaborate than the one at the entrance. It was locked from the other side, but a kick from Captain Lieber was more than enough to open it. However, it didn’t lead into a hidden room—it was just a back exit to get outside.

Ah, that makes sense, actually. The door in the front had a bar locking it from the inside, so of course you would need another door to get out.

Although disappointed, I kept looking for yet another door, but nothing turned up.

That can’t be right... This has to be the place! My feelings of impatience grew as time passed by without result.

“Doesn’t seem to be one...” Captain Lieber sounded impatient too.

I pressed my ear against the wall, no longer worried about getting dirty, and listened to the reverberations as I tapped.

I need to find it. I need to, quickly! I need to get back to Sir Leonhart. I need to see that he’s okay as soon as I can. Why can’t I find it?!

“Maybe there’s some gimmick in this painting?” suggested Captain Lieber.

Both of us walked over to the fresco on the north wall.

“It does seem the most likely bet...but I can’t see anything obvious.”

We’d checked every inch of the rest of the temple, so this was the only place left.

“It’s splendid,” whispered Captain Lieber with admiration as he illuminated the painting with his torch. “The work of a master artist.”

I nodded in agreement and looked up at the fresco. I was no art critic, but the painting’s greatness was apparent to even my untrained eyes. It captured every little detail like a photograph, from the singular strands of hair caught in the wind, to the supple skin and the creases in the woman’s dress. What struck me the most was the shine on her lips with their gentle smile, the light-red tint on her cheeks, and the vibrant look in her eyes. I almost expected her to start moving.

“A goddess... And these flames represent the demon lord, I suppose,” said Captain Lieber, cocking his head as he illuminated the black fire.

She probably *was* a goddess. The woman, with flowing locks of golden hair and blue eyes, was wearing a white chiton, and a halo was floating above the crown of her head. She was smiling, and although she bore no weapons, she was extending her white hand toward the black flames.

Those flames probably represented the demon lord, as Captain Lieber had suggested. It looked like they’d been driven toward a corner, as though fleeing the goddess’s hand, and the sinister flames were blazing furiously. They were dark red in the center, a symbol of deeply held resentment. That ugly, dark-red mass stood out, completely different from the white of the goddess’s chiton and the clear blue of the sky in the background.

“I wonder if...” I said, reaching my hand toward the fresco, but I stopped myself. This was a masterpiece, a national treasure, and it seemed wrong for me to lay my hands on it. But then, I bit down on my lip and shook my head to clear my mind of hesitation.

I bit the bullet and touched the center of the black flames. As I pressed down harder with my fingers, a block the size of my hand receded slightly.

I can move it.

“Captain Lieber,” I called, looking over my shoulder.

Understanding my intention, Captain Lieber replied, “I’ll take over.” He handed me the torch once more.

He pushed, and the block, which was about ten square centimeters large, slid back with a coarse noise. Then there was a loud clunk, and the block would go no further. Captain Lieber fumbled around inside the hole for a few seconds, and then it appeared that he’d found something on the top side of the recess.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “There’s a handle. I think I can pull it.”

“Please do.”

Captain Lieber yanked, and I heard the sound of chains slinking past each other. Simultaneously, a portion of the painting slowly began to move. As I watched in blank amazement, an entrance appeared before us.

The hole was a meter and a half tall and a bit less than a meter wide—inside, there were stairs leading down. I briefly thought about how I’d seen a movie archaeologist discover a similar gimmick in a ruin. It was dark in there, the sort of dark that made me think something might jump out at any second.

“And there we have it,” Captain Lieber croaked with excitement.

I gulped. Hunching down, I crept through the hidden door. I kept one hand on the wall so that I wouldn’t slip and fall, but the cold (and my nerves) had robbed it of feeling.

Slowly, step by step, I descended.

The air was so stale that it was difficult to breathe. There was a distinctive stench—in addition to the stink of mold—that assaulted my nose.

Captain Lieber raised the torch aloft, giving us a dim view of the room, which was smaller than I’d imagined. In the center was a stone altar, above which were two unlit candlesticks, on the left and the right. Between them was a fist-sized stone, sitting ominously in the center of the room.

My heart pounded in my chest. “It’s really here...” I mumbled, my voice hoarse with nerves. *I’ve found it. After all this time, I’ve actually found it.*

“So this is the object sealing away the demon lord...?” asked Captain Lieber, his face grim. He illuminated the stone with his torch.

Its round silhouette now visible in the torchlight, the stone looked like any other—just a small, measly pebble, the sort that nobody would spare a second look at if it were lying on the roadside. It was difficult to accept that inside this meager stone was a power dreadful enough to destroy the world.

Nervously, I reached for it, but Captain Lieber stopped me.

“Let me take it, Your Highness. We don’t know what might happen.”

Though grateful for his offer, I declined. “No.” I shook my head. “I’ll do it.”

We don’t know what might happen, and that’s exactly why I need to do this. This is the mission that was given to me. Besides, we should be fine as long as I don’t break it. Let’s hope I didn’t just jinx myself...

I gingerly reached over, mouthing a silent prayer. Ever so lightly, I tapped it with a fingertip, as though I were testing its heat. I waited a few seconds, but nothing happened. Once more, I reached out, then I cupped it in my hands and lifted it. Because of the coarse texture and slight weight, there was no mistaking that it was indeed in my hands.

I’d been holding my breath, but now I let it out. My muscles all relaxed, and I felt like dropping to the floor and just sitting there.

I did it... I actually retrieved the demon lord.

I clutched the small stone against my chest while experiencing a mixture of relief and accomplishment.

“Are you all right, Your Highness?” asked Captain Lieber, gazing into my eyes.

“I am,” I replied, managing a smile. “We’ve done what we came for, so let’s go and find Sir Leonhart.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll take the stone now. We wouldn’t want you dropping it.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ve brought a box especially to...” I rifled through the pouch I’d hung at my waist, but it was too dark and there was too little elbow room in here to find it. “Actually, first, let’s get out of here,” I said.

Crouching down, I exited through the doorway. I was worried I'd bump my head, and I was quite small, so Captain Lieber must've struggled to get out.

While waiting for him to make it through, I turned around and caught sight of the painting. The image of the goddess and the demon lord, barely visible in the dimness, was chilling to see. The black flames in particular made me uneasy... Just looking at them was frightening. *You probably wouldn't guess that the flames represent the demon lord without being told, but you'd definitely still find them unsettling.*

"Hmm...?" Though we'd accomplished what we'd come to do, something seemed off. Something *had* seemed off for some time...but what? It felt like the answer was taunting me, just out of reach.

You probably wouldn't guess that the flames represent the demon lord without being told...

Yeah, that's right. Only a handful of people know the demon lord is sealed here.

Then how did...

"Hah!!!"

The words I'd heard just a few moments before played back in my mind: "*So this is the object sealing away the demon lord...?*"

How did Captain Lieber know about the stone? Sir Leonhart and I never explicitly said what we were searching for, other than a temple. We also never said a word about a hidden door, so why did the captain start tapping the walls and the floor?

My shoes clopped loudly on the floor as I retreated a step back.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

For a split second in the torchlight, Captain Lieber's face looked like a total stranger's.

The Reincarnated Princess Screams

I wanted someone to laugh, wanted someone to tell me I was thinking too hard. I wanted someone to say that I'd been too stressed for too long, and that I was now so relieved to have finally found the demon lord that my weary mind had made an error.

Please, somebody, anybody, tell me that's what's going on here!

I tried to smile, but it came out looking stiff. My heart wanted to deny it, but my body was less trusting, and my legs crept back, step by step, toward the exit. In my retreat, I caught my heel on a pebble and stumbled.

Hurriedly, I regained my balance, and all the while, Captain Lieber remained perfectly still. I was clearly acting odd, but he didn't try to stop me, didn't voice any concern. He just stood there. His usual friendly smile was gone, and his handsome features made his neutral countenance all the more terrifying.

"Your Highness."

"I'm sorry, I've, er, I've got a strange thought in my head... I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding though."

I wanted him to agree that it was, but he said nothing one way or the other. The silence itself seemed to be an answer of sorts, and it drove me crazy.

"Please!" I cried, practically screaming. "Tell me it's a misunderstanding! Just say it!"

This didn't startle him. His calm gaze remained fixated on me. The silence, the look in his eyes and on his face, each and every bit of it tethered my hunch to reality.

It terrified me.

This was too much for my heart to bear, and a grating pain racked my chest. It felt like it was about to break.

"You're clever, so you've probably worked it out already." His calm voice was

monotone, and it sounded nothing like Captain Lieber's.

I wanted to believe that I was deluding myself, but every single thing was pointing toward the same conclusion.

Lapter's spy had spent an entire year wandering the border without turning up any results, but then, just like that, they'd beat us to the temple...almost like they'd had a sudden tip-off. How could that be? Had they just happened to concoct the same wild idea as me about the decoy temple—today, of all days—enabling them to lie in ambush for us?

Every suspicious inkling I'd felt so far suddenly had an explanation. If someone on Nevel's side was a spy for Lapter, then everything made sense.

"Why...?!" I croaked, forcing my voice out. Despite the tempest of emotions swirling around my heart, the question that made it out of my mouth was an incredibly standard one.

"Why?" repeated Captain Lieber. "You're familiar with the stories Isaac collected, so I'm sure you can work that out too."

"Walter's...?"

"Not the ones from Nevel... The ones from Lapter."

I'd discussed with Sir Leonhart how the demon lord was portrayed in Lapter's folklore. In Nevel, the demon lord's flames were portrayed as a calamitous omen foretelling destruction; in Lapter, they were viewed as a miraculous means of prolonging life.

Remembering that, I had an idea—there was someone whose life Captain Lieber would want to prolong.

"For...your wife?"

Captain Lieber made no reply. He simply put on a calm, sad smile.

"Isn't there another way?" I almost asked. *"Is that what your wife would really want?"* The words didn't come out though, and that wasn't a result of my self-restraint. No, it was because I could tell from the look on his face that he'd asked himself those very questions many times over already.

"My wife was born with a heart deformity. The doctors apparently told her

she wouldn't survive to adulthood."

When I'd heard she was frail, I'd pictured her the same as George's mother, Emma. I'd even thought that I might be able to help somehow. How conceited I'd been... I was neither a god nor a doctor, just a mere child, and there was practically nothing I could've hoped to do for the captain's wife.

"She turned down my proposals to marry over and over because of how little time she had left. But she gave in on my thirtieth try and we got engaged. She actually turned around and proposed back to me. 'I'll do everything I can to live even a day longer for you, so please marry me,' she said."

Captain Lieber was looking down slightly, and he narrowed his eyes. It was almost like he could see his wife right now. The look in his eyes, the tone of his voice, everything was imbued with his love for her.

"She'll be twenty this year. She's fought for five years longer than the doctors said she could. It's cruel to ask any more of her. I know that." Captain Lieber's voice was trembling. He was clenching his fists together tightly as though in agony. "But...I can't do it. I'm not strong like her. I can't let her go. I know it's wrong, but I want to be with her forever."

I couldn't just tell him that he was wrong, that he was being selfish. *If I were in his shoes, I might do the same. At the very least, I definitely wouldn't be able to accept the loss of someone dear to me without a fight.*

This decision couldn't have been easy for him. He surely must've thought of his family, of his soldiers and friends, of Sir Leonhart...must've been tortured by the need to choose.

However, he'd simply made the choice anyway.

"To keep my wife alive, I don't mind selling my soul to a demon."

He'd simply wanted her to live, even at the cost of the entire world. Was it wrong to call that love?

"So forgive me, Your Highness."

The thud of Captain Lieber's boot hitting the floor echoed throughout the room as he made a move toward me. Step by step, the distance separating us

shrank.

I need to run! I thought, but my feet were nailed to the floor. I wasn't exactly scared, but rather, anguished, and so, so tormented by what I'd learned. I didn't know what to do with myself.

"Give me the stone. I don't want to have to hurt you." With three meters of distance still between us, Captain Lieber came to a stop. His eyes opened wide in a moment of slight hesitation, and then he scowled suspiciously. "Why... Why are *you* crying?" he asked.

Only then did I realize that my cheeks were wet. Tears fell past my chin and splattered wet spots onto the floor.

"Why aren't *you*?" I sobbed, my voice quivering.

Captain Lieber's eyes grew even wider than they had been before. When he blinked several times in surprise, he looked like his old self, as though all of this had just been a bad dream. But eventually, he narrowed his eyes and put on a knowing smile, the loving kind that a mother would use toward an unruly child.

"You're very kind," he remarked. "It must take its toll on you, sparing room in your heart for everyone you meet... But I'm sure that's what's winning Leonhart's heart."

"Huh...?"

"I know I have no right to say this... But I hope you'll take good care of my friend."

His voice sounded so gentle. "*Don't say that like I'll never see you again,*" I wanted to tell him, but the words didn't come out.

What should I have done? What route should I have taken to get the happy ending where everyone is left smiling? No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't come to an answer. This is real life...not a game. There is no magic choice to get everyone what they want. It's only fairy tales that end with "and they all lived happily ever after."

My head sank, and tear after tear fell from my eyes. A sob spilled past my teeth as I bit down on my lip.

I'm so hopelessly powerless.

But then my ears picked up the sound of someone sprinting toward us.

"It appears that our time's up." The kind smile vanished from Captain Lieber's face, and he strode briskly toward me.

I instinctively tried to get away, but he grabbed my arm. The torch fell to the floor and rolled away. I writhed, twisted, and squirmed, but I had no hope of being able to resist him.

Captain Lieber pried my hands open and wrenched the stone from my grasp.

"Don't...!!!" I cried.

"Princess!!!" Sir Leonhart burst into the temple. He'd heard my scream, and he called out to me with desperation. With my arm still in Captain Lieber's hold, I whipped my head around, meeting Sir Leonhart's eyes.

I heard him gasp and saw his eyes grow wide, and then he immediately unsheathed his sword. His eyes, which always looked so calm and kind, now harbored a ferocity that I'd never seen in them before.

"What's going on, Ernst?" He hadn't raised his voice, but his words carried clearly. If anything, his request had been quiet and monotone, which made it all the more intimidating.

"What's going on...?" mused Captain Lieber as if to himself, utterly unfazed. He looked away from Sir Leonhart and chucked the stone into the darkness.

I covered my eyes as, in my imagination, I saw a vivid image of it shattering. But wait as I might, that shattering sound never came. I peeked open my eyes a crack, and for the first time, saw that a lone man was standing in the darkness.

In his hand, he grasped the demon lord's stone.

He held up the stone tauntingly, a smile on his handsome face. "It's now in my possession."

It was him. The young man we'd met at the restaurant.

Ratte.

So he does work for Lapter... I was definitely shocked to learn that he was an

enemy, but the revelation of Captain Lieber's betrayal had left my brain in too poor a state to properly process it.

"That's what's going on," announced Captain Lieber matter-of-factly.

Sir Leonhart grimaced as though in agony. I was having trouble accepting the truth, and I'd only known the captain for less than a month. I couldn't begin to imagine how painful this must've been for Sir Leonhart.

"You would betray our kingdom?" Sir Leonhart forced his voice out, and it was hoarse from his attempt to restrain his surging emotions. I felt intimidated by the fierce look in his eyes, and his gaze wasn't even pointed at me.

Captain Lieber, however, didn't seem the least bit bothered by it, and he let out an amused laugh. "Betray?" As he parroted Sir Leonhart's question, the corners of his lips rose. "I crossed that bridge a *long* time ago."

He laughed viciously, as though intentionally choosing to play the villain. Captain Lieber then gently pushed me forward.

Sir Leonhart's eyes widened when he saw me stumble. "Eeeernst!!!" His beastly howl echoed throughout the room.

He took flight.

Captain Lieber caught the downward swing of Sir Leonhart's strike with his own blade. A flurry of sparks flew from the noisily clashing swords.

"Sir Leon...!" I tried to run over to them, but Ratte grabbed my hand.

"Oops, you'd better stay here. Stray too close to *that* and you'll end up with more than just a cut." Ratte pulled me toward himself and moved us away from the action.

I hated following his order...but he was right. The fight between Sir Leonhart and Captain Lieber was taking place at a speed too fast for my eyes to follow. Plus, Sir Leonhart wasn't being his usual calm self—I wasn't sure I could talk any sense into him right now. I wanted to stop them, but I didn't know how. All I could do was bite down on my lip and watch the fight go on.

Sir Leonhart swung his sword down as though it were an outlet for all his fury.

But Captain Lieber deflected the strong blow with ease. He seemed to be

enjoying himself too much, considering the intensity of the fight. “Didn’t think I’d get the chance to fight you for real again! How long’s it been, Leonhart?!” Captain Lieber laughed like they were in the middle of a practice spar.

“Shut your mouth!!!” Sir Leonhart shouted him down and simultaneously unleashed a sweeping strike with his sword.

Captain Lieber stopped the blow with his gauntlet and knocked the blade away. Then, in return, Captain Lieber thrust his sword toward Sir Leonhart’s face.

Sir Leonhart dodged the blade by the skin of his teeth, and a single tuft of his black hair scattered into the air. Recovering instantly, Sir Leonhart kicked Captain Lieber’s chest to propel himself away and put some distance between them.

The sound of their heavy breathing filled the dimly lit room. After eyeing each other up, the pair lunged across the distance separating them.

The torch flames on the floor danced up wildly due to the rush of air from the bout, and the flickering light cast the two knights’ shadows on the wall. Each time the shadowy blades met, a cacophony of ringing metal echoed throughout the temple.

Their swords clattered together. The two men glared as they pushed against the other’s strength, and Sir Leonhart screamed, “Why, Ernst?! Why did you betray us?!”

“I think you know the answer already.”

Captain Lieber tilted his blade and screeched it along the edge of Sir Leonhart’s, then used his hilt to fling Sir Leonhart’s blade out of the way before slashing down diagonally toward Sir Leonhart’s shoulder.

Sir Leonhart dodged by jumping backward.

“You’re clever, so you must’ve realized that there was a possibility I might betray you. Lapter beat you to the punch every step of the way—I’m sure that idea also occurred to you. But you let the vague notion of *friendship* cloud your judgment!”

“How dare you say that!!!”

Sir Leonhart swung, but Captain Lieber fought the sword off with his own before swiping at Sir Leonhart, who avoided the blow by crouching. There was a grating noise as a deep chunk was gouged out of the pillar behind him.

From his crouched position, Sir Leonhart kicked Captain Lieber’s feet out from under him.

Captain Lieber landed safely with his hands on the floor. Sir Leonhart thrust down with his sword, but Captain Lieber rolled sideways and evaded the attack.

Jumping to his feet, now it was Captain Lieber’s turn to go for Sir Leonhart’s legs with his sword. Sir Leonhart jumped out of the way, then caught the captain’s incoming blade near his feet, deflecting the attack and raining down his own slash from above.

Every bit of my attention was focused on the fight that was happening at breakneck speed before my eyes. I was too preoccupied to remember to breathe.

“You’re not fighting like a knight, Leonhart!”

“That’s because I’m fighting to kill you,” spat Sir Leonhart. “You can fight as honorably as you want when you’re dead!!!”

He thrust his sword, and a trickle of red ran down Captain Lieber’s cheek. Without a pause, he thrust the heel of his left palm into Captain Lieber’s chest. With Captain Lieber now off-balance, Sir Leonhart swung his sword down once more.

Captain Lieber managed to catch the sword with his own at the last moment. “Ooh, so scary,” he chuckled, out of breath.

Although Captain Lieber appeared to be enjoying himself, Sir Leonhart seemed to be struggling—emotionally, not physically. The look on his face was more ferocious than I’d ever seen, but it didn’t frighten me... It just made me sad.

I never wanted to see him like this. I never wanted to let him feel like this.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen you look so desperate,” taunted Captain

Lieber.

“I’m sure it is. And it’ll be the last thing you ever see.”

The two of them carried on a conversation while their blades were interlocked.

“I wish I’d gotten to see a little more,” said Captain Lieber, and it was difficult to tell whether he was joking or being serious. His facial expression was as gentle as it had been in the fortress when he’d told me about Sir Leonhart’s past. “Come on, Leonhart. Now more than ever, you understand what could drive me to such foolishness.”

At that, Sir Leonhart flinched slightly. “Shut up...” He hadn’t let any of Captain Lieber’s taunts bother him up to this point, but for some reason, this in particular seemed to shake him.

“So you *do* understand.” Captain Lieber smiled happily. “Let me tell you, Leonhart. There’s no greater happiness than finding someone who’s irreplaceable to you, but—”

“Shut up!” Sir Leonhart shouted as though to drown out Captain Lieber’s voice.

“—but at the same time, you’re plagued by the constant fear of losing them.”

“I. Said. Shut! Up!!!”

A metallic crash.

A sword, swiped away.

It flew in an arc through the air and clattered onto the ground before spinning into the wall. It stopped there.

Sir Leonhart thrust the point of his sword at Captain Lieber’s throat.

The sound of their breathing as their shoulders heaved was all that could be heard in the room.

The fight was over, the winner decided.

Nobody moved a muscle. The silence lasted for what felt like both an instant and an eternity, until Captain Lieber broke it. “Not gonna kill me?” he asked Sir

Leonhart, his eyes calm. He cocked his head and smiled, and there was no sign of anger or panic on his face. Perhaps he'd seen this coming. Perhaps, even though he'd sacrificed the whole world for the sake of his wife, he'd *wanted* Sir Leonhart to stop him, somewhere deep in his heart.

Sir Leonhart just stared at him, saying nothing. Beneath his gentle eyes, I could see the mental torment he was suffering, and I gasped.

I can't stand this!

This isn't how I want it to end!!!

"Sir Leon, please...stop."

He could surely hear me, but he gave me no reply.

Worried now, I took a step forward, but Ratte held me back. "Let go of me," I said, trying to pry his hand away, but I was no match for the man's strength.

While I was struggling with Ratte, Captain Lieber continued to goad Sir Leonhart. "I'm the man who betrayed both your kingdom and the one you want to protect. Are you really gonna let me live?"

"Captain Lieber!" I shouted with frustration. I wanted to scream, "*Just shut up!*" and kick him to the ground. *Don't put the man I hold so dear under any more strain! He's already been hurt so badly; I won't let you carve out another scar in his heart!*

"If you don't finish me off and get running with your princess, the agents from Lapter who're surrounding this place are gonna get you."

"You have a point..." Sir Leonhart scrunched his face up, smiling tearfully. The look on his face seemed to show me that he'd made up his mind.

"Stop! Please!" I frantically cried. "You don't have to do this!"

I didn't want to see this. And not because I was righteous, but because I was selfish. I didn't want to see what was about to happen.

I shook my head like a child throwing a tantrum. Captain Lieber just smiled sadly. "You're too kind, Your Highness. You should close your eyes. Keep them closed until Leonhart's work is over."

The moment I heard his gentle, soothing voice, I felt a conflagration of emotion so fierce that I worried it would burn out the synapses of my brain. The feeling was so powerful that my body began to tremble.

Oh, I'm kind, am I? Sir Leonhart's "work"? And what's that supposed to be? Stop spouting off about things like you know what you're talking about!

The emotion that coursed through me wasn't sadness, wasn't hurt. No...pure and simple rage had taken control.

"Shut up." I stomped my foot on the floor.

When everyone's eyes turned to me, I shouted as loudly as I could, "Shut the hell up! Don't force something like that on Sir Leonhart!!!" I emptied my lungs as I screamed the words out. I was yelling louder than I ever had in this lifetime.

The two fighters froze in amazement, staring at me with their mouths wide open.

I'd gone and dropped the good girl act in front of Sir Leonhart, a grievous blunder, but my heart was in too much turmoil right now to be worried about that. I needed to vent all the anger inside or I'd go insane.

"So it's Sir Leonhart's job to kill you?!" I bellowed. "How could you be so stupid?!"

Sir Leonhart's job is to protect me! Cleaning up after an old friend who's gone off the rails isn't part of the job description! Sort that shit out by yourself!

"You've known him for a long time, so you *know* how kind he is. You *know* how much he cares for you as a friend, right? So how could you say something so...cruel?!"

I'd envied the easygoing friendship they'd shared, the casual way they'd spoken to each other. I'd been so jealous because I knew that I'd never get the same treatment, no matter how many years I might spend by his side. But at the same time, I'd been so happy to know that Sir Leonhart had a friend he could open up to about anything.

I clenched my fists, and my nails dug into my skin. "Not only have you betrayed him, but you want to scar him forever too?! Who do you think you

are?! Don't think you'll get away with it! I won't let you, not now, not ever!"

I didn't know whether it was wrong to want to sacrifice everything for a single person. But I did know that it didn't give you the excuse to hurt the people who care about you.

"Sir Leonhart isn't your noose to hang yourself with! If you wanna die, then do us all a favor and end yourself!!!"

Now that my nonstop outburst was over, I was out of breath, shoulders heaving. Everyone was struck dumb, and nobody said a word. The whole room was silent.

As the hot blood began to drain from my head, rationality returned to my thoughts.

Although I can't see it myself, my face has probably undergone a dramatic transformation from red to white in an instant, I thought, trying to detach from the situation. However...that realization didn't exactly help to calm me.

What...did I just say? Well, growing pale now will do me no good—the words have been spoken, and there's no way to unsay them.

But I didn't mean to go that far! I don't want Captain Lieber to die! Oh God, I know I was pissed, but how could I say something so horrible?!

I was panicking, deathly pale, but I couldn't think up a solution to fix things. A simple apology would've probably sufficed, but that would've felt so awkward.

Oh no, what should I do? Won't somebody here just please say something to lighten the mood?!

I knew that my mental prayer had been answered when the silence enveloping the room was interrupted...by stifled laughter. It was quiet at first, but it grew louder and louder and louder. I looked around to find its source.

Ratte stood there with one hand covering his mouth and the other on his belly.

My eyes shrank to pinheads.

"If you wanna die then do it yourself! Never thought I'd hear a princess say that! Wow, you really are on another level!" The assassin was laughing so hard

that he had tears in his eyes.

Seeing that, I just stood there blankly. *What the hell is happening right now?* My brain couldn't keep up. I knew I'd said something outrageous, and I was aware that I'd shown myself to be an awful princess... But for a killer sent from an enemy country to burst into uncontrollable laughter at my behavior? That was just weird. *Does that even happen?*

Usually, when people laughed at me, I'd always get mad, but that didn't happen now. I wasn't sure *what* to feel, and I didn't know the right way to respond.



“Nevel really is *such* an interesting place.” Once his laughter was under control, Ratte wiped a tear from his eye and turned to me.

I instinctively tried to take a step back, but he took my hand and smiled.

“Here, take it.”

Into my palm, he dropped the stone that sealed away the demon lord.

My eyes went round, and I couldn’t even summon my voice to ask him, “*Why?*” I looked at Ratte, then at the stone, then back at Ratte.

Seeing that, his eyes narrowed with amusement.

He pulled out a thin knife from beneath his cloak, and Sir Leonhart reacted immediately, preparing to lunge toward us. However, Ratte threw the knife onto the ground as a gesture to show that he meant no harm. Then, he raised both hands above his head. The blade of the knife on the floor was covered in dark red liquid.

Wait... Whose blood is that...?

“The captain there betrayed Nevel for Lapter...and I did the opposite.”

“Uhhh...?” I mumbled, dazed. *He did the opposite of Captain Lieber? What does that mean?*

While I stood there with a stupid look on my face, Ratte kneeled down before me. He respectfully took my hand, his eyes lit up like a dog wanting praise for his trick, and with pride in his voice, he said, “As proof that I’ve betrayed Lapter, I’ve finished off all the surviving agents that the Black Lion missed.”

So the blood coating the knife belongs to...his comrades? But why? Why would he betray Lapter?

At least now I knew why he hadn’t taken flight with the demon lord’s stone the moment it landed in his possession. However, I still had no idea what the motive was for his betrayal. I couldn’t comprehend what his thought process could’ve possibly been, and I gawked at him like he was an alien.

Unperturbed by my staring, Ratte smiled beautifully. “So, since I have the princess of such a beautiful country standing right in front of me, I want to ask:

whaddya think about hiring me, Your Highness?"

This was just one more item to add to a long list of things I hadn't expected to happen tonight, and it felt like my head was about to burst.

Please, somebody, anybody, explain what's going on in a way I can understand! I thought this with all my heart, staring off blankly into nothingness.

The Reincarnated Princess Prays

Captain Lieber heaved a heavy sigh. He pushed Sir Leonhart's sword away with his hand and sat down on the floor. It wouldn't be entirely accurate to say that Captain Lieber looked like a curse had been lifted, but the expression on his face didn't seem far off that description. His shoulders fell limp. "Okay," he whispered, his voice calm. "So I would've lost either way."

I wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or relieved. Maybe both.

Ratte stood up and posed in a gesture of thought. "Hmm... You turned down my offer the first time I tried to recruit you, remember? That was when you gave me this." He lifted his bangs and pointed to the scar on his forehead. "At that point, I hadn't decided to betray Lapter either."

So in his work as Lapter's spy, Ratte had tried to get Captain Lieber to betray Nevel... And Captain Lieber had turned him down at least once. But, cracks must've appeared in the captain's determination when his wife's condition began to deteriorate.

"You have a king who governs righteously and a crown prince who is sincere. You have a smart second prince and a kind princess who loves her people. On top of that, you have loyal knights and happy subjects. Nevel is the ideal kingdom. And when the captain here refused my offer, I grew even more sure that this paradise would never fall. Every fairy tale ends with a 'happily ever after.'"

A paradise? It surprised me that Ratte saw Nevel that way.

I knew that, compared to other countries, Nevel was blessed with a good climate, bountiful natural resources, and the economic benefits that come from those boons. And obviously, I knew that my brother was indeed a sincere person, and, though it irked me, I had to admit that my father was a pretty good king.

However, it was a far cry from paradise. Wherever light falls, it casts a

shadow, and Nevel had a dark side too. There was a rich-poor divide and more than a few unscrupulous nobles. The treatment that sorcerers like Lutz and Teo faced from an early age was nothing to be proud of either.

“It looks like you want to object, Princess.” Ratte smiled wryly as though he’d read my mind. “I bet I can guess what you wanna say. ‘There’s no such thing as a paradise,’ right? I know that. Nevel has its faults too. But, despite that, I still think that Nevel is beautiful.” Ratte spoke softly, his eyes unfocused and reflecting on somewhere distant. They looked like the eyes of a child, staring in wonder at the marble they’d packed away safely in a box.

“But then,” Ratte sang, giving a dramatic flourish of his hand like the narrator of a stage play, “the captain here made the decision to betray his country. And if nobody had chosen to step in, the paradise of Nevel would’ve fallen at the hands of an evil kingdom. At first, I thought it wouldn’t be right for an assassin with blood on his hands to come to the rescue of a paradise. That’s not how the story goes, and I’ve never heard a fairy tale ending like that.” Ratte wore a self-deprecating smile as he spoke.

He must’ve looked at Nevel like a treasure, one he mustn’t touch. He knew it wasn’t a paradise, but he wanted it to be. He wanted to be allowed to believe that. I could sense him wishing, *praying* for that.

“I was powerless to do anything but sit in the front row watching the play to the end... Or so I thought, until I learned who *this* little girl really was.” Ratte spun around on his heels to face me.

His eyes, pointed at me, were vibrant and excited, and it threw my mind off-balance. “Wh-Who I really am?” I stuttered, repeating his words.

Ratte’s head bounced up and down as he nodded. “I did have my suspicions that the girl who came from the capital with the Black Lion might be someone important, but I wrote the idea off pretty quickly. You didn’t have the right hair color for starters, and no princess would plunge herself into danger. No, everyone knows that princesses wait in the safety of palaces or at the tops of towers for their princes to come and rescue them.”

I groaned quietly. I knew better than anyone that I was an oddball princess, and it didn’t do my self-esteem any good hearing it said out loud.

“But you *actually are* a princess. You carried on your adventure without any complaints, even as your nose turned red from the cold and your head went dizzy from the bumpy rides on a horse you’re not used to riding. I’ve never heard a fairy tale like *that* either.”

Ratte was speaking as quickly and excitedly as a child telling a heroic tale.

My spirits, on the other hand, had been flushed down the drain. There was nothing pleasing about hearing example after example of my patheticness. I wanted to complain, “*Couldn’t you have picked some examples that made me seem a little more cool?*” but I decided against it. There *were* no such examples. Never even once in all my travels had I ever come off as cool.

“But then I realized... If a princess can break the mold that much—”

Ratte’s eyes narrowed happily, and he continued, enunciating each word with feeling.

“—then there’s nothing wrong with an assassin who fights for justice. If for no other reason than to make sure that the amazing princess gets to end her adventure story with a happily ever after.”

His words took me by surprise, and my eyes widened. I bit down on my lip and gently squeezed the stone, holding it to my heart.

Not a fairy-tale ending...but not the worst ending either. I’d like to believe that.

“Your Highness...” called a soft voice.

I’d been staring at my feet, but I raised my head now and saw that Captain Lieber was looking at me.

He opened his mouth to say something, but eventually, he closed it again. He looked like he wasn’t sure what to say, just like a lost child.

I walked slowly over to him. When I was a meter away, I crouched down. As we gazed at each other, I racked my mind for the right thing to say. But search as I might, I couldn’t find anything. I didn’t know what to say.

A long, long silence ensued.

“Sooo...” I said at long last, but my voice croaked. *So uncool!* I pretended to

cough to disguise the noise. "I'm sorry for what I said."

Captain Lieber blinked his eyes in surprise.

"I got carried away, and, um...I don't want you to die."

This is the least cool I've ever been. Ratte's right, this definitely isn't a fairy tale. And all the kids would be disappointed if they read a heroic epic as lame as this. But I need to put my thoughts into words, or else I'll definitely regret it.

"Please...live on."

Captain Lieber's face scrunched up, and he immediately hid it from view behind his hands so I couldn't make out his expression anymore. However, I could see the slight rising and falling of his muscly shoulders.

I panicked, unsure how to react, but then I felt something warm on my shoulder. Looking around, I saw that Sir Leonhart had placed his hand there.

When our eyes met, he smiled a little awkwardly. That smile, however, was soon gone. Sir Leonhart knelt down next to me and turned his eyes to Captain Lieber. His calm gaze harbored no wrath or hatred.

"Ernst."

Captain Lieber flinched when Sir Leonhart called his name.

"I will never be able to forgive you. Not until my dying breath." I saw Sir Leonhart's fingers press even deeper into his raised knees. I knew that he was trying to hide his emotions, and I couldn't bear to watch it.

I reached out to him.

When my fingers made contact with Sir Leonhart's hand, his eyes widened.

Even I was surprised by my own bold actions.

Sir Leonhart stared at me, and then he slowly narrowed his eyes. Wearing a tearful smile, Sir Leonhart placed his other hand on top of mine. "But even so... No, because of that, you must live. Live right through to the very end."

I had no idea what kind of punishment awaited Captain Lieber upon our return to the capital, but it would surely be a heavy one. Even so...we wanted him to live.

And even if that was selfish of us, we wanted it all the same.

Please, live on to the end.



Bonus Short Story

The Reincarnated Princess and the Laundry

As of late, my daily routine began with laundry.

It was coming up on a month since I'd arrived in this village in the southwest of Vint. The medicine had started to work, and most of the stricken were on the road to recovery.

Unlike the Khuer, I didn't know how to nurse patients, so my primary responsibilities involved doing all the household chores. For the first few days, everyone had tried to snatch the laundry away from me, aghast at the idea of a *princess* dirtying her hands with such work, but the objections had soon stopped coming. After all, there just weren't that many able-bodied people around to do the work.

I hung some washing on the line that was suspended between two trees. Then, I pinched the corners of each garment and pulled, stretching out the creases. I fetched the next bit of washing from the basket, and with one big shake, sprawled it open.

"Good morning. Hard at work as ever, I see."

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw a woman carrying a basket of vegetables. She smiled at me in greeting.

"Good morning," I replied. "The weather today's perfect for laundry, so keep on piling it up for me!"

"That's very helpful, but don't push yourself too hard in this heat."

"I know, I know."

As I watched the woman take her leave, I took the sheet I'd spread out and clipped it to the washing line. The weight of the sheet caused the line to droop slightly.

Maybe I tied it on wrong?

Fearing what would happen if the sheets touched the ground, I sprinted over to one of the trees that anchored the clothesline. With one hand on the tree trunk, I stood on my tiptoes, as tall as I could, and stretched up to the branch where the line had been tied.

All of a sudden, a shadow sprawled out along the ground nearby. Before I had a chance to wonder whom the shadow belonged to, a voice called out from right next to me.

“Princess.”

“Whoa?!” I yelped.

When I turned around, I locked eyes with Sir Leonhart. “S-Sir Leon!”

“Allow me,” he said, untying the cord and retying it more tightly to the branch.

I stared at him, entranced by the lovely sight of him at work. *Wow, I get Sir Leonhart this early in the morning... Did I win the lottery? Oooh, check out those muscles popping out of his shirt...and his neck too, oh my God!*

“That should do it,” he said.

“Ah! Th-Thank you!” My head was full of impure thoughts, and I felt the need to avert my eyes. *Uh-oh... I was totally leering at him. Hope he didn’t notice...*

“I’ll help with hanging the laundry up too.” With that, Sir Leonhart pulled the next item of clothing from the basket.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly ask that of you.”

He momentarily paused his work and let out an amused laugh. “But it’s all right for a princess to be doing it?”

Okay, you do have a point there...

“I’m no help with the cooking or the nursing,” he continued, “so this is the least I can do.” Staring deep into my eyes, Sir Leonhart tilted his head. “Okay?”

I nodded feebly, trying to act composed despite the arrow of love piercing my heart. *With how handsome and cool he already is, Sir Leonhart has no business*

being this cute!

Although in my heart I was squirming, I got back to the task of hanging up the washing. I stole a glance at him from the corner of my eye and saw that he was working with a smile on his face.

Ohhh, this is so lovely. We're like a happy married couple doing the chores together.

While I was engaged in my fantasies and getting well ahead of myself, I heard a little girl's voice. "Rooosie?"

"Hmm?" When I pricked up my ears, I heard it again.

"Rooosie!" Her voice was high-pitched and had a childish lisp, and I knew just who it belonged to.

"Here I am!" I said, lifting the corner of the sheet on the line and poking my head through.

Seeing me, the little girl raced over. Her petite figure jettisoned through the air toward where I waited with my arms outstretched.

"Rosie! Found you!"

"Good morning, Katerina. How's your fever today?"

Katerina had been bedridden with the disease until a few days ago. Her mother had fallen ill as well, so she hadn't been able to read Katerina her bedtime picture books or get her to sleep. I'd quickly taken over those jobs, and it hadn't taken long for Katerina and me to bond.

"S fine! All better now!"

"Are you sure about that?" I lifted her soft, brightly colored hair and touched our foreheads together. The evidence backed up her claim; her little forehead was about the same temperature as mine. "Yep, your fever's gone. But even so, you should stay inside your home a little bit longer to let your body fully recover."

"No faaair..." She puffed out her cute little cheeks.

Yeah, what fit and healthy little kid wants to be told to sit still?

“Will you be there?”

“No, I’ve got some more work to do.”

“I’ll wait till you’re done!” declared Katerina, latching onto my waist.

Oh my God, that’s so crazy adorable... But how am I gonna get any work done like this?

“I’ll do the rest, Princess,” proposed Sir Leonhart, poking his head through from the other side of the sheet.

“But...” I murmured, reluctant.

Seeing that, Sir Leonhart narrowed his eyes and smiled. He reached out with his large hand and gently stroked my hair. “You should let me treat you every once in a while.”

“O-Okay,” I replied. I quickly bowed my head down to conceal my bright red cheeks, and when I did, I found a pair of big, round eyes staring up at me.

“Rosie?” Katerina asked, tugging at my skirt.

“Yeah?” I knelt down by her side.

What she said next was absolutely wild. “Is he your husband?”

Her innocent question left me speechless. *How could you say something so wonderf—er, I mean, ridiculous?! And more to the point, she said it so loudly! Sir Leonhart definitely heard, right...?*

Nervously, I looked over my shoulder at Sir Leonhart. He was smiling awkwardly, and I thought I could see a slight rouge tint to his cheeks. I was probably imagining it, or perhaps just seeing what I wanted to see.

But even so, my heart was filled with gratitude.

Thank you, Katerina. I’ll be having sweet dreams tonight thanks to you.



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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:
Volume 5

by Bisu

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